Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
13er
Good
Boy
EAT
Magical Girl
Raising Project
Black

Diner
Good
Tasty
EATS
Magical Girl Raising Project
Black
Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no

TETTY GOODGRIPP
Can grab anything with her magic mittens.
MISS RIL
Can change her body into different metals.
RAPPY TAYPE
Can preserve anything with her magical wrap.
ARC ARLIE
The more hits she takes, the stronger she gets.
DRILL DORY
Can dig through anything and everything with her magic drill.
MAGICAL GIRLS

MEPHIS PHELES

Her sweet words will corrupt your heart.

KANA

Ask her a question, and she'll know the answer.

KUMI-KUMI

Can destroy objects and reassemble them.

CLASSICAL LILLIAN

Knits whatever she pleases with her magic knitting machine.

THUNDER-GENERAL ADELHEID

Can reuse absorbed energy.

CALKORO

Calculates and fights using her magic abacus.

PRINCESS LIGHTNING

Fights enemies with the power of lightning.

PSHUKE PRAINS

Fights using her magic water gun.

RANYI

Can connect one door to another.

DIKO NARAKUNOIN

Can momentarily disappear.

SALLY RAVEN

Can create crow familiars.

SNOW WHITE

Can hear the thoughts of those in need.

13

Asari Endou
Illustration by Marui-no

YEN ON
New York

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Asari Endou

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Cover art by Marui-no

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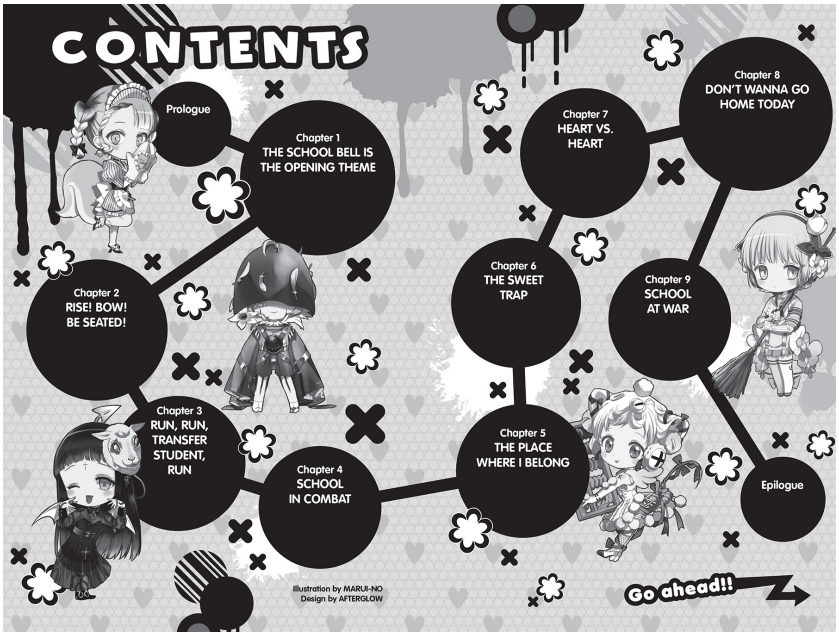
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Illustration by MARUI-NO
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Go ahead!!

The Magical-Girl Class's Promise

Introduction
This magical-girl class was established to facilitate the progress and development of magical girls. Our goal is to nurture those service-minded individuals who stand above the rest, while cultivating love, courage, kindness, strength, beautiful conduct, indomitable vitality, and—most of all—a deep understanding of the work of a magical girl.

Rules
These rules are not intended to be restrictive. They are the guiding principles for your growth as magical girls. Be conscious of your magical-girl-hood as you aim to make the most of your time at this school.

Manners
Rudeness will not be tolerated no matter how powerful one's magic is.

- Greet others with cheer.
- Endeavor to be polite to your superiors and treat them with respect.
- Get along with your friends and compatriots. Fighting is not allowed.

Attire
The costume is the soul of a magical girl.

- When not transformed, wear your designated school or athletic uniform.
- When in magical-girl form, wear only your preregistered costume.
- Any costume changes or addition of armaments and

decorations must be reported to your homeroom teacher.
- Carry your magical phone at all times.
- Personal digital assistants or communication devices are forbidden.
- Mascot assistance is permitted only outside of school. Mascots may not accompany you or contact you by any means while you are on school grounds.

To and From School

Punctuality is the first step to becoming a great magical girl.

- Arrive at school through the gate before the first bell rings and return home when it is time to leave.
- Notify your homeroom teacher if you will be absent due to illness or other reasons.
- If a family member from your household passes away, you will be offered bereavement leave.

Classes

A student's duty is to learn. All magical girls who attend this school are students.

- Transformation during class is not permitted unless instructed by the homeroom teacher.
- Similarly, detransformation during extracurriculars is not permitted unless instructed by the homeroom teacher.
- Misuse of your magic is forbidden in both regular and extracurricular activities.

Facilities

Let's take care of the school facilities.

- You may go to the nurse's office only when your homeroom teacher has determined that you've received a level-B or higher injury.
- You may not use the library outside of classes where you are granted special permission.
- Immediate use of the school store is not allowed. When you wish to make a purchase, please fill out an order form with the items you require and submit it to your homeroom

teacher. Upon receipt of the form, the teacher will facilitate the exchange of payment and goods.
- Entrance to restricted areas such as the courtyard or roof is strictly forbidden.

Umemizaki Junior High School

Thanks to the kindness and efforts of Umemizaki Junior High School as well as the City of Umemizaki, we have been granted the use of the old junior high school campus for magical-girl classes.

- Let's not forget to be grateful.
- You are not to enter the current Umemizaki Junior High School grounds without authorization.
- Bear in mind that excessive contact with regular people has led to the exposure of many magical girls' identities. Make sure to exercise restraint when associating with Umemizaki Junior High School students.

After School

Attending school does not excuse you from magical-girl activities.

- You are still a magical girl even when not transformed and on a break.
- Do not post about magical girls or the Magical Kingdom on social media platforms or message boards.
- Do not discuss magical-girl classes even on magical girl–oriented social media or video content platforms.

Our School Song

1. A magical garden with budding young leaves
   Brimming with passion and emotion
   Through time everlasting
   Oh, oh
   Magical girls
   Their voices carry unbroken

PROLOGUE

◇ **Kana**

A richly colored haze whirled around before gathering at a single point. As the colors grew thicker, the haze swelled, burst, and then scattered. Beneath the dregs fluttering down, there was a faint glow of red that brightened to yellow, and then when the glare was unbearable, she realized she was conscious.

She gradually became aware of her own body and mind, and before long, the girl came to her senses. Something large, flat, and hard was touching her back. It was cold. It seemed she was leaning against it. She felt the same thing on her bottom. She was probably sitting on the floor.

Neither rushing nor taking her time, at a rate she thought had to be about the usual, she opened her eyes. There was a smiling woman. Who was she? She was crouched down, looking at her. The girl turned her head to see that, behind the woman, a human-sized object was lying there, tied up in chains, with talismans stuck all over it.

She blinked, then took a breath. She swallowed her saliva.

She should have been able to do these things unconsciously, but everything felt off. It was as if her body were not her own. Why was that?

Naturally, she figured if she had questions, she should try asking them. Opening her mouth produced an “Ah.” Confirming she was able to make noise, she turned back to the smiling woman and asked, “Is this not my body?”

No. It was unquestionably hers.

“Was I not using it for a long time?”

She managed to understand why she felt strange. It had been so long since she’d moved her body that even the smallest motions felt not quite right.

Stifling that sensation, she stood and examined either side.

She was in a small room. The walls and floor were plain

concrete and a little over six times her height in width and depth. The ceiling was about twice her height. She turned around to see she was standing at the center of the room in a pillar-shaped receptacle. In that case, she must have just been freed from it. The floor, walls, and receptacle were all a spotless white, of smooth and slightly soft material. Some sort of resin, maybe? The only way into the room was the sturdy-looking metal door behind the woman. Her features should have been ordinary, but her face was strangely striking, albeit plain enough that you would instantly forget it if you looked away. Her skirt, high heels, and glasses made her appear quite formal and stiff, although she had a mischievous smile on her face.

"…Where am I?"

The woman didn't respond. But an answer rose in the girl's mind: This was a prison.

The woman bowed her head deeply and quickly raised it again. "My name is Yoshioka. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Yoshioka."

"How are you feeling?"

"Not great."

"Yes, yes. I understand that quite well. Imprisonment via a magic seal has a negative impact on both mind and body. Though ostensibly it's merely imprisonment, the reality is equivalent to torture. Quite inhumane indeed." Yoshioka was polite in both speech and manner, but she came off more comical. She shook her head as she lamented, and the exaggerated gesture made her glasses start sliding off, so she pushed them up with the middle finger of her right hand. Heaving a sigh, she briskly fixed her mussed black hair and turned back to the girl. Yoshioka smiled once again.

"But the times have changed," she said.

"The Magical Kingdom won't change so easily."

"Many things have happened—indeed, so many things. It all began with a bit of a tizzy over a jailbreak that brought to light the various crimes of related persons. It shook the faith in the facilities of magical-girl prisons and the institution itself. That forced changes to be made from the foundation up. Those dark days of cruel and unusual punishment are over. All of you have been given the right to a new life. Obey the authorities' instructions and put in your best effort, and should they deem that you have been reborn as a good magical girl, you can earn greater freedoms."

Yoshioka was cheerful, but the girl was not particularly impressed. She analyzed her own thoughts—*I don't seem very happy about this situation*—and shook her head. Her mind still felt fuzzy. Perhaps the punishment Yoshioka had described as "equivalent to torture" had affected her brain.

"So they're going to work me like a slave?" the girl asked.

"Think of it as public service. And the more you work, the better you will be treated."

"My memories feel vague."

"Records say that some of your memories have been erased."

So this wasn't a side effect of the seal, but that didn't make her feel better. She stepped her right leg out of the receptacle, and once she saw Yoshioka step backward, she brought her left leg out as well. The floor was colder than the receptacle. She felt it keenly with her bare feet.

Yes—she was barefoot. Parting her hair to the sides, she looked down at herself. Not only was she barefoot, she was completely naked—sans underwear, even. She had no memory of taking off her costume herself or someone else taking it off for her.

"You were a magical girl called Kana," said Yoshioka. "Do you remember?"

"Kana." She swung her head from side to side, grabbing her hair when it started whipping back and forth. Now that Yoshioka mentioned it, she *had* been called that, or at least that was her gut feeling. The girl vaguely recalled a number of people calling her Kana, and she'd responded to the name, too. "That's right. Kana. I was called Kana."

"About your previous work—"

A name suddenly rose up in Kana's mind, and without a second thought, she blurted out, "Caspar…"

"Correct! You worked for a group under the jurisdiction of the Caspar Faction… Could it be that your memories have returned?"

"No…I don't think so. That just sort of came to me."

"Ah, of course. Your memories have been tampered with via magical means, so you wouldn't remember that easily. I'd be quite astounded if you said you remembered everything."

Just as Kana herself had said, she *sort of* understood that her name was Kana, as well as that she had been a member of the Caspar Faction. She just couldn't grasp what specific sort of work she'd been doing. She put a hand to her chin and stared at the

ground.

Kana knew the basic gist of her past: She'd committed a crime and had therefore been imprisoned. It was fair to say her brain was operating adequately enough. It wasn't really that her mind was fuzzy, but rather her memories had been intentionally erased. That more or less corroborated what Yoshioka told her.

"But…," Kana started.

"But?"

"If the memories of the crime I committed were erased before my imprisonment, wouldn't that keep me from reflecting on my actions?"

Yoshioka clutched her stomach in laughter, and the object beside her trembled along with her. It seemed there was something alive inside it.

Kana did not attempt to consider why the woman who had freed her was laughing but instead observed her gestures, countenance, and attire.

"Are you a magical girl?" Kana asked.

That was when it dawned on her that this woman could transform into a magical girl and that what was inside that object was already transformed.

Yoshioka's expression soured, and she adjusted her glasses with a vague smile that didn't reach her eyes. "You may have realized, but that's your magic. Asking a question always draws an answer from the person you've asked. It's incredibly convenient magic, although I urge you not to abuse it."

"Why shouldn't I do that?"

Some answers are based on that person's subjective view, thereby distorting the response if you ask someone who believes a lie is the truth. Sometimes you might learn things you shouldn't know. I feel that you should get in the habit of thinking for yourself and using your head as much as possible. I don't want to see my privacy invaded.

Further reasons rose in Kana's mind at length. She must have learned Yoshioka's answers through her magic.

"Was the reason I was imprisoned and had my memories erased because I learned—?" Kana was about to continue with, *"something I shouldn't know,"* but then shut her mouth halfway. She doubted knowing that would benefit her, and Yoshioka had just said Kana shouldn't overuse her magic, so she suspected Yoshioka would respond negatively to such questioning.

Yoshioka smiled with satisfaction and nodded twice, then gestured toward the exit. “Anyway, let’s walk as we chat.”

Kana followed Yoshioka out into a hallway. There was a rough iron fence that bordered the side all along it, with a wide atrium on the other side. The iron fence and hallway continued around the atrium, with sturdy-looking doors lined up at regular intervals. Prisoners like Kana had to be locked up one to a room. As they walked, Kana looked out into the atrium and saw other identical floors, as if they were carbon copies—one, two, three, four, five, six of them. This was the fourth of six levels; it was quite a large facility. If there was one prisoner per door, then the entire facility might hold more than one or two hundred people total.

With so many of the type of person who would be imprisoned here—the worst of the worst—security would naturally be strict, but aside from Yoshioka at the front and the bound-up magical girl wriggling alongside her, they didn’t encounter a soul as they walked down the hall. They went into a square hole in the floor to descend a set of stairs, walk some more, then go down more stairs. The whole time, not only were they never challenged, they didn’t even pass by anyone.

Kana tilted her head, puzzled. “Seems like there’s nobody here.”

“We’ve cleared everyone out.”

“I see.” Now she knew why not a single person had appeared aside from this strange human and strange magical girl. But a prison was a public facility, and the Caspar Faction Kana knew would not have exercised enough influence to be able to clear one out like this. The Caspar Faction in the depths of her hazy memories lacked the power or motivation for it and beat the other factions only in their trend to pessimism.

“Things are pretty different from what I’m used to,” said Kana.

“Are they?”

“Feels like I was sealed away for a long time.”

“Not at all. The Caspar Faction gained power only just recently. Or rather, they didn’t gain power so much as the Osk and Puk Factions caused issues that resulted in a decline of their influence… But in the end, power dynamics between factions are simply relative.” Yoshioka’s shoulders shook slightly. Kana couldn’t see her expression, but she must have been laughing. She seemed giddy overall, or like she was in a good mood. Maybe a member of the Caspar Faction being in a good mood was proof that they’d gained

power.

The torso of the magical girl who crawled along at Yoshioka's side bobbed along with Yoshioka's laughter. Kana couldn't tell if that one was in a good mood or not. The way she was tied up, you'd think it would be difficult for her to even move right if needed, but if they were bringing her to meet one of the worst of the worst, locked up in a jail, then that much would be necessary. She could surely fight, even tied up—what's more, she would be powerful enough that she could easily subdue Kana.

"About your…tied-up magical girl," said Kana.

"Pay it no mind. Treat it just like the air you breathe."

The bound girl shook the part of her that probably corresponded to her head. Perhaps that was a greeting. Kana opened her right hand and raised it up to shoulder height, waving back. She didn't know if the girl could see the gesture or not.

They walked, then went down some stairs, then walked some more. The hallways echoed with the sounds of Yoshioka's heels clicking against the floor, the tied-up magical girl slithering along the ground, and Kana's footsteps.

"I'm not going to ask you to do anything particularly difficult," said Yoshioka.

"That's good."

"I would like you to be in a certain place and live a completely normal life there."

"Pretty strange job."

"A magical girl's work is all about the mundane, you know."

Yoshioka stopped in front of the big door at the end of the lowest floor, her back hiding the panel by the door as she struck it. The thick metallic door made a heavy sound and slid to the side; Yoshioka turned back to Kana, broke into that same smile, and said, "Go ahead, go ahead," gesturing with an open palm to enter.

Unlike the rest of the prison facility Kana had seen thus far—including the hallway and stairs as well as her own cell—this room was highly decorated. It was the same size as the one she first found herself in but had navy-blue wallpaper, a low cabinet, a leather sofa, and a long table with a knit-lace tablecloth, with what seemed to be some folded-up clothing laid atop it. She stepped inside and felt something plush underfoot, making her reflexively look down. After a few steps on the lime-green carpet, she reached out to the table to pick up what had been laid there.

“That’s for you,” said Yoshioka. “Please try it on.”

Clothing—and underwear, too.

Kana put on everything and then spun around in a circle. Her semi-glossy silver hair swished back and forth, and her skirt fluttered in tandem. “This doesn’t look like a costume.”

“Indeed. It’s a uniform.”

It was like a sailor uniform. Between the navy-blue color and the modest design, it was too plain for a magical-girl costume. In other words, it didn’t seem like it would suit Kana. It was extremely lacking in terms of comfort and felt somewhat restrictive, like she was tied up.

“Doesn’t seem good for magical-girl activities.”

“Now, now, let’s not sell this outfit so short. It’s been magically reinforced, which means it won’t end up in tatters from a bit of intense activity. Think of it as camouflage for the place you’ll be infiltrating.”

“You still haven’t told me where that is.”

Yoshioka gestured for her to sit on the sofa and sat down opposite Kana. She swept back her hair and tucked it behind her ear, then smiled so brightly you could practically hear her teeth sparkle. The magical girl curled up beside the sofa stirred slightly, but Kana didn’t even look at her.

“It’s a school. I’m going to have you transfer into a class for magical girls.”

◇ Mariko Fukuroi

Mariko was the busiest she’d ever been.

She’d taken charge of the athletic committee for the lazy rationale that they didn’t seem to do much, but as the Spring Walkathon loomed closer, the committee suddenly burst into activity. The more enthusiastic students would stay at school until late at night diligently making pamphlets, which meant that Mariko, their supervisor, had to stay late, too.

She’d also become an adviser to the science club, since that field was more or less her specialty, and the annual science fair had kicked the whole club into high gear. Seeing the members dedicating their sweat and youth to research, Mariko couldn’t help being vividly reminded of her younger self, and then she couldn’t

pretend like she didn't care about the club. One of the projects, "Transpiration and Vertical Gardening with Non-Native Plants," very much piqued her interest, as it seemed like it could offer her some interesting results if diverted to use for Marika's magic. But focusing all her attention on that one project would be clear favoritism, so she helped the other teams equally, which just made her even busier.

Mariko had also been tasked with managing the student computers under the assumption that a young person like her would best understand the tasks involved. She took it in stride, figuring this wasn't that big of an ask, and simply checked for viruses, trojans, and connections to dangerous sites, then submitted reports about her findings. Taking care of these tasks with ease led people to think she was "used to this stuff," so she was assigned to manage the teachers' computers as well under the pretext that it was also part of school administrative support. By the time she was wondering if all this had gone beyond the purview of a substitute teacher, Mariko had been entrusted with most of the student records. As could be expected from a school with two magical girls there—it was fair to say the school itself was rather adrift from common sense.

Mariko was charged with one class, since the original homeroom teacher was on maternity leave, and it was chaos there, too. Yamada, a girl who was forever a reserve on the softball club, was trying to get her mitts on the boyfriend of Suzuki, the club captain, and Suzuki and the rest of the softball club girls had attacked Yamada for it. Yamada ended up as Public Enemy Number One, kicked out of the class LINE group and isolated. The boys felt this drama was none of their business and looked the other way, and though some girls outside of the softball clique felt sorry for Yamada, none reached out to her. Thus, Yamada was once again paired up with the gym teacher for stretches. Even after she'd wound up all alone, she was unbending and committed in her assertion that she wasn't at fault. As a magical girl, Mariko considered such mental fortitude tenacious, but who knew how long that could last. So in an effort to reach a resolution cautiously, but also as quickly as possible, Mariko listened to the students, lectured them, and admonished them many times over.

With both duty and passion attacking Mariko from every angle, no matter how much she worked, more tasks just kept piling up.

She usually found herself rushing through the school, hair in disarray and sweat streaking down her forehead as she scurried along.

Going up the steps two at a time, she came up in front of the science prep room. She pulled a ring of keys out from the pocket of her white coat and was about to unlock the door when someone called her name.

Mariko turned around and looked down: two girls, both of whom looked familiar. They weren't from Mariko's class; in fact, they were in a different year. Yoshiko Yoshinoura, standing in front, looked a bit sulky, but Mariko could sense a strong determination in her tightly pressed lips. Sari Kasuga, behind her, seemed worried—flustered, if anything. They were both Koyuki Himekawa's friends.

Mariko smoothed her hair, adjusted her glasses, and faced the girls once more. "Yes?"

"It's about Koyuki. You don't know anything, do you?"

An answer nearly spilled out of Mariko's mouth, and she instinctively snapped it shut. Koyuki Himekawa—the magical girl Snow White—had hardly ever shown her face at school since the start of her second year. Of course her friends would be worried. Mariko did want to tell them about everything, but she couldn't.

"Ms. Fukuroi, you look like you just bit a lemon."

"Urk."

Snapping her mouth shut must have put an odd expression on her face. Yoshiko was eyeing her suspiciously, which only flustered Mariko even more. After clearing her throat a couple times, she finally calmed herself down.

With a serene expression that said everything was fine, Mariko told the girls, "She has canker sores."

"Really?"

"Really and truly."

Personally, Mariko—as the magical girl Marika Fukuroi—would have liked to join Snow White if at all possible. Even if she was just helping, it wasn't often she got to have fun and get a big chance for some legal violence, but she was bound by both duty and passion, so there was nothing to be done. What a sad state for Marika Fukuroi, the most free-spirited of magical girls, of all people. *But—but when I think of the students' faces, I really can't leave them*, she thought, her feelings coming and going in waves.

Keeping her flurry of emotions from showing on her face,

Mariko blinked once and slowly started, “Why ask me—?”

“Ms. Fukuroi, you knew Koyuki before you came to this school, right? She didn’t tell us what your connection was, but you know things about her that we don’t, right?”

Mariko blinked three more times, then stiffened her expression and said flatly, “I can’t tell you the pacifics.” She flubbed it.

White coat fluttering, she turned away from the two girls and continued, “And it’s not like we’re particularly close anyway.”

“So you do know her, after all!” Yoshiko yelled after her as Mariko unlocked the door to the prep room and went inside. When she tried to close the door behind herself, she got her thumb stuck in it. Smothering a cry, she stuck her right hand in her mouth.

There was no helping that she’d been pulled away from the fun due to her own circumstances. But being forced to make excuses for another person on top of that was a different story altogether. Whatever Snow White was doing, she ought to at least talk to her own friends. It didn’t make sense for her to toss it all off on Mariko, as if she’d manage things for her somehow.

Mariko pulled her magical phone out from the pocket of her white coat, turned it around in her hands to place it on the desk, and ran her finger across the screen to contact Koyuki Himekawa.

◇ **Snow White**

The new magical phone she’d hardly used vibrated in her costume. *Whatever their business is, I can’t have any interruptions right now*, she thought, sliding her hand over her clothes to turn off the phone.

Beyond the trees, she could faintly hear the voice of someone’s heart. She didn’t rush to approach it.

She made a circle with her thumb and index finger to signal to Uluru, who was running behind her. That meant to slow down. Snow White heard both Uluru’s sigh and the relief in her heart. She took Ruler, her weapon, and thrust it into the ground. “Let’s go,” Uluru said quietly, and Snow White started walking.

The sounds of steps on dry leaves and fallen branches echoed through the forest, then eventually came to a stop.

“Ah! It’s her! The one you beat in that cave…!” Uluru cried as she pointed to the blue magical girl Princess Deluge standing in front of a beech tree. But before she could finish her sentence, she

started mumbling indistinctly under her breath.

Uluru had been about to bring up the time when Puk Puck had occupied the ruins, when Snow White and Deluge had fought, but she realized it'd be a bad idea. The old Uluru would have said all of that without hesitation, but she'd grown now. She was showing consideration for others and watching her tongue.

Snow White looked to Armor Arlie, Blade Brenda, and Cannon Catherine, who all stood surrounding Deluge.

Snow White had fought the three magical girls in black before, when they'd all been controlled by Puk Puck.

Arlie had never removed her helmet, whether it be in a briefing or a break or in Puk Puck's presence, but now that she had her visor up, she looked exactly like Brenda and Catherine. She must have changed, too.

Snow White smiled at the trio as they cackled gleefully and brandished their weapons. A moment later, she deliberately dropped her grin as she turned to face Deluge.

CHAPTER 1

THE SCHOOL BELL IS THE OPENING THEME

◇ **Tetty Goodgripp**

It was a three-minute walk from her house to the closest station. From there, she would sway on the train for two stops to emerge from the west exit of the biggest station in the city. It was another minute's walk from there to her destination, where she would climb up to the seventh floor of the seedy old building that had no elevator—in this day and age!—before finally passing through the school gate. This was the route she was supposed to be taking to school.

But travel costs were generally on your own dime, and that was too much effort to bother with every morning. So Fujino Tohyama would start by transforming into the magical girl Tetty Goodgripp, then sprint past two stations, run over some boxy concrete public buildings, a few private residences, and lots of telephone poles, iron towers, and electrical lines, before entering the building from the roof. The door up there wasn't locked, something she chose to interpret as an act of kindness toward magical girls from those in charge. The strange floating sensation she felt going through the gate got her excited the first time, but by the second time, she was used to it; after the fifth time, it was boring; and now she felt nothing. It was no different than any mundane form of public transportation.

Detransforming as she came down the stairs, Fujino felt a bit Cinderella-like as she stood before the door. This was one of the Magical Kingdom's gates that instantly transported you to a designated destination.

The gate was in front of her, but Fujino didn't go through it yet. First, she smacked her cheeks twice, hard. Harmony, unity, tranquility, safety—the more peaceful and idyllic an idea was, the more strength it required to see it to fruition. You couldn't be the student rep of a magical-girl class just by being nice. Once she was feeling fully fired up, Fujino inputted the numbers and letters into the console beside the door and went through the gate.

Her surroundings shifted from concrete to wood.

She had instantly teleported from the reinforced concrete tower to the old wooden school building, and by the time she noticed that the atmosphere had changed, Fujino found herself in completely different scenery. She pushed open the door to the courtyard; at this time of day, only people involved with the magical-girl class would be in here, so she didn't need to worry about bumping into someone who would question her presence.

This place was affiliated with Umemizaki Junior High School, more or less—externally, they were calling this an AP class—but the two institutions were completely separate, with no connection between the magical-girl campus and the new school building. The Magical Kingdom must have wanted to eliminate even the slightest risk that this secret class would be leaked.

Fujino strode across the pristinely manicured lawn, went over the light brown brick path that cut through the courtyard, then called out to someone bent over by a wheelbarrow filled with a bucket and pruning shears.

"Good morning."

"Oh, good morning, Tetty. You're looking cheerful as usual this morning."

Between the dirt-stained green overalls covered in small leaves, the white towel wrapped around their neck with a local bank's logo, and slightly worn knee-high rubber boots, this individual who looked like a bona fide gardener was actually a mage. This mage had shown Fujino many spells before, such as making weeds soar into the air like birds before dropping them into a wheelbarrow or running a lawn mower without laying a hand on it.

"A good day to you." Still bent over, the mage turned toward Fujino and smiled.

Fujino returned the smile and replied, "You too." The mage gave two slow nods in a kind gesture. Every one of this person's smallest gestures and words were languid, easygoing.

When Fujino was still in elementary school, she'd had a next-door neighbor named Mr. Satou who talked at a similarly slow pace. He was a sweet old man who gave Fujino a few candies to take home every time she saw him.

She wasn't in elementary school anymore. Now she was a full-fledged middle school student, and most importantly, she was a magical girl. No matter how lenient a person seemed, she had enough sense not to say out loud something rude like, *"You remind me of this old man who used to live next door to me."* So she kept that thought to herself and called the mage Mr. Satou in her mind.

Something about this mage was mysteriously calming. Those of Fujino's classmates who associated with mages a lot often complained about them, claiming they were all nasty people who look down on magical girls. "So useless, considering how arrogant they are," her classmates would say, or "They act like they're so much better than everyone," but you couldn't know those things unless you actually dealt with them.

Fujino left the mage version of Mr. Satou and strode briskly into the school building.

Unlike what you might imagine from the words "old school building," the interior was surprisingly new. Apparently, it had been renovated immediately after it was designated for use with magical-girl classes. The linoleum in the hallways had a spring to it, like a major hospital or private library, and Fujino thoughtlessly rushed on and onward, slowing down only when she noticed the sign reading NO RUNNING IN THE HALLS pinned to the wall with thumbtacks. Not that she had to rush anyway; her destination wasn't far. From the courtyard, she went along a covered walkway up to the bathrooms, which were only five seconds from her classroom.

In front of the classroom stood three girls with their heads together, talking. They were all Fujino's classmates, members of Group Three. They must have heard Fujino coming, as they all turned to her.

Before they could call out to her, Fujino raised a hand and greeted them with "Morning," and a smile.

The girl with long, straight black hair with blunt bangs and similarly blunt layers next to her face—her magical-girl name was Princess Lightning—quietly replied, "Morning." Her face was so frighteningly beautiful—even though she wasn't transformed!—that

the slightest movement of one feature cranked the tension up. When she parted her deep red lips and let her clear voice sound, that tension reached its zenith. Or maybe it was just Fujino who felt that way, but it did actually make her palms sweaty, and sometimes, her voice would even tremble.

When she had first joined the class, she'd been overwhelmed by Princess Lightning's uncanny beauty, and it had been difficult to even say hi. But ever since that field trip before Golden Week when she had seen Princess Lightning stuffing her face with what had seemed like an armful of rice balls, Fujino had relaxed a bit, and now she could exchange a few words with her, at least.

And then the next girl. The right side of her head had been shaved to reveal a tattoo of a chimeric *yokai*—a Nue—that went over her head to her cheek, in a style sort of like an ink-wash painting. On the left side, her unshaved hair was in a mohawk that went in a circular fire pattern. This girl was Diko Narakunoin. She just bowed her head without a word.

Diko had shocked Fujino in a different way when she'd first seen her. But when Fujino recalled the school rules, they'd said nothing about hair or tattoos. Diko was equally stoic in nature, like she did her own thing—in the class book-report contest, when everyone else had picked books about magical girls, she'd been the one person to select classical literature from the Taisho period.

The third girl—Ranyi—had a light brown ponytail that went down her back; she likewise replied "Morning," but her expression was not friendly. She made it clear with that look that she wanted to go back to talking with her clique. She could be particularly exclusionary, even compared to the other members of Group Three. During their night marches, she would never leave her group, and even if you tried to approach to talk to her, she would hardly even reply.

Looking at them made her remember the clique of girls back in elementary school who would whisper among themselves over every little thing. Girls would mutter that they had bad vibes, while the boys would point and call them nasty, but they never stopped doing it, and they'd stayed like that until graduation. Fujino had thought both then and now that if she could just have a proper conversation with these girls, they could make friends. Maybe it was actually because she'd been unable to make friends with those girls in elementary school that she felt this way now.

Passing in front of the girls, she went into the classroom.

When she had attended a regular middle school, there had been a hidden division between cliques. There had been a hierarchy derived from the combination of various elements: who stood out and who was more reserved; who had talent and who didn't; hobbies and interests; clubs and after-school activities; good-looking or ugly; personality, nature, and disposition. This hierarchy couldn't be seen with the eye or expressed in words, but it had been real, and all the girls in her class had been clearly aware of it.

She really hadn't been fond of that tendency. But even so, you couldn't live life as a student if you ignored it.

"Morning, guys," she said.

"Morning!"

"Good morning, Tetty."

"Morn-ning."

"Morn."

Since magical-girl school was for socially aware magical girls to get together and learn with the shared goal of becoming full-fledged professional magical girls, Tetty had assumed there would be no such hierarchy or divisions. But when she actually entered the class, she'd found they were generally divided into the same groups, leading to the disappointing clique situation. As the student rep, Tetty wanted this to be a class where people could make friends beyond such social boundaries.

Group Three made no attempt to be friendly with other groups. They would do no more than say hi or speak on specific business matters. Just one member of the group, Sally Raven, would respond with a smile, while the rest of them offered only curt reception.

Group Two had Fuuko Sayama, who had been in Fujino's class in elementary school. Not only that, Fuuko had also become a magical girl in the same exam as her—her magical-girl name was Mephis Pheles. They'd grown apart after Fujino changed schools, but after several years, they were miraculously reunited in this class. When the class had first started, they'd been on fairly good terms, but a spat over a game of cards had led to them talking less.

Fortunately, her own group was full of good girls. At first, they'd been pretty stiff, but a month of classes had fixed that. They'd experienced many events together—a field trip, night marches, a group-wide choral competition, a book-report contest. They had now become friendly enough that when they all went out

on Golden Week to the amusement park, they talked about how, if they'd become friends a little earlier, then maybe they could have gone out together before the holiday, too.

Miss Ril broke the ice, her plump frame quivering. "Have you heard, Tetty? There's a transfer student coming."

"A transfer student? Guess we get those here, too."

Miss Ril usually wore a gentle smile, but right now, her eyebrows were drawn up in excitement. She hadn't been this worked up since that basketball game during their rec time, when she'd been unfairly judged for traveling.

And Miss Ril wasn't the only one so up in arms.

"And get this! Apparently, it's not just any transfer student!"

"Not just any transfer student…?" said Tetty. "You mean she's a magical girl, right?"

"Well, duh, if she's transferring into a magical-girl class! But that's not what I mean! It's a bigger deal than that! I mean like one of *these*!" Rappy Taype said with a grin. She held her wrists out as if they were handcuffed, the chestnut-colored hair piled on top of her head swaying with the movement. She was loud in general, but today she was even louder—and quite excited. Being so close to her shouting made Fujino's ears ring. During rec time, the volume and energy of her voice alone would pull the whole team along after her, but Fujino felt it was a little too loud for regular use.

"Prizun." The sisters Arc Arlie and Drill Dory folded their arms, nodding twice in the same manner, like carbon copies.

"Huh? A pri…what? A prison?" Fujino repeated.

Between their skin that was even darker than Rappy's, light brown eyes reminiscent of hazelnuts, long black hair that was naturally wavy, and broken speech, Arlie and Dory were clearly foreigners, although Fujino couldn't really figure out where they were from. They weren't fluent enough to explain it. Studying for tests was always an ordeal for them.

Dory repeatedly said, "Prizun," while Arlie nodded along every time.

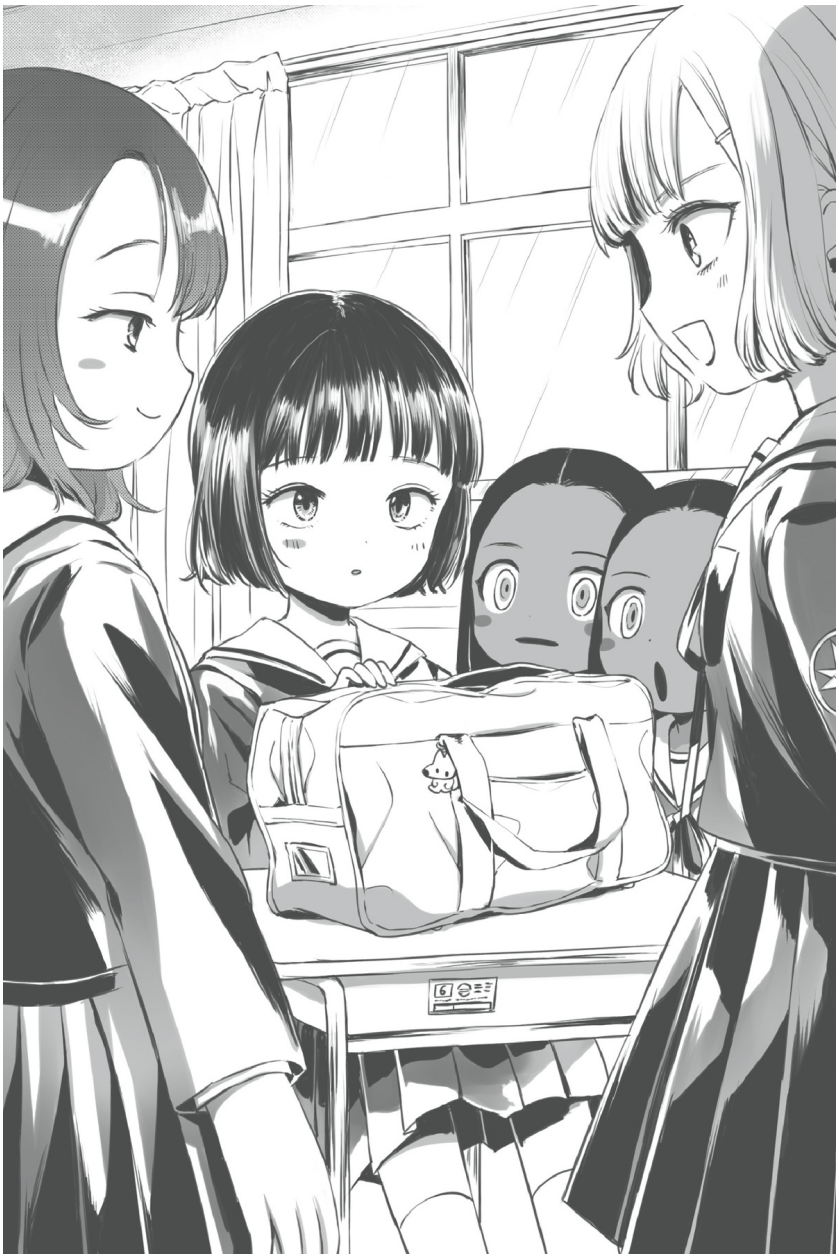
"I heard she came to school in cuffs! Isn't that bonkers?!" cried Rappy.

"Wait, what? That's what you meant by prison?" said Fujino. "Not that she worked at a prison?"

"She's the real deal! Just outta the slammer!"

"Mafia!"

“Pushy, pushy!”



“I hope she isn’t a serious offender,” said Miss Ril.

“Uh, yeah, she obviously is! A legit gangster, a real baddie!” Rappy squealed.

“Ohhh, so that’s why Group Three left the classroom to talk.” Fujino peered toward one corner of the room. Group Two was huddled over there, having a discussion of their own.

“This transfer student will be in Group Two, won’t she?” said Miss Ril.

“Numberwise, I guess so,” Fujino replied.

“Fiiive.”

“Fourrr.”

“I’m *so* glad we’ve got five people in our group!” said Rappy. “Seriously, what a relief! If we had four, that’d mean we’d get stuck with the ex-con, right?! No way do I wanna be watching my back while we’re all doing stuff together!”

“You don’t have to be so nasty about it,” Fujino told her.

“I’m not being nasty! This is legit scary! For real, though!”

Rappy talked like she wasn’t happy about this news, but she was acting rather gleeful. She’d always been the type who liked events or the excitement of a festival, and she’d get worked up about things, even if they were scary or dangerous.

Miss Ril offered a worried smile, while Fujino spoke vaguely about the matter, then looked away. Glancing over at Group Two, Fujino noticed they were all looking restless, talking on about this or that.

Fujino turned back to her fellow members of Group One and lowered her voice a notch. “Not that I really know, but…this means she did her time properly and was released, right?”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t have come here after escaping,” Miss Ril agreed.

“Prizun break!”

“Season twooo!”

So this transfer student coming in after everyone else was just out of prison. Group Two was seriously unlucky, having to welcome her as a member of the group. It was only natural that they would be upset, and Fujino felt bad for them, basically being made to take the brunt of the situation.

“Sounds difficult, doesn’t it?” said Miss Ril.

“It really does,” Fujino commented, and when she glanced over to Group Two, her eyes met with those of the one walking toward them.

She was just over five foot six inches tall, with an adult build. Her natural dull blond hair, cut evenly at her shoulders, pale skin, blue eyes, and her magical-girl name on top of that all indicated her European origin. Unlike Arlie and Dory, however, her Japanese was fluent. With a very affable smile, Thunder-General Adelheid raised her right hand with a “Morning.” Miss Ril and Rappy greeted her back as they split away to either side, and Adelheid slid right in.

“Sup. Did y’all hear?” she asked.

“An ex-con, right?! Yeah, I heard! For reals!” Rappy nodded so emphatically that it looked like she was headbanging.

“Adelheid, hasn’t your group heard anything?” Miss Ril asked.

But Adelheid just shrugged theatrically. “Naw, we ain’t got a darn speck o’ information.”

Adelheid was perfectly capable of speaking properly. At the beginning of the first semester, when some big-shot mage had come on inspection, all her responses had been flawlessly enunciated and grammatical; the look on her face back then indicated that this was how she normally spoke. But most of the time she employed a rather dubious accent, yapping about how it’s “all a part o’ my brand.”

“Numberwise, I reckon she’s gon’ join up with Group Two,” Adelheid continued.

“Yeah, probably,” Fujino said.

“Probable.”

“Prob.”

“We were talkin’, sayin’ for starters we’d treat her like a guest and see how things go. But still, Mephis might just randomly start up a scuffle with ’er. Bein’ Mephis, after all.”

Fujino looked over at Group Two. Fuuko Sayama—the magical girl Mephis Pheles—shook her head hard as she asserted something emphatically and repeatedly, while the other two members of her group seemed to be somehow pacifying her. *She never changes*, Fujino thought with a sigh. Her appearance—big glasses and all her hair gathered in a braid—had changed quite a lot from the past. She was the same on the inside, though. Even if at a glance she looked like a bookworm, she was a delinquent at heart. She got into fights at the drop of a hat.

Ever since elementary school, Fuuko had fought anyone she didn't like, even boys or older girls, and once she became a magical girl, she'd even challenged her examiner, saying she didn't like her arrogant attitude. The reason the games of *Millionaire* the groups had been playing against one another on lunch breaks were now canceled was also because Fuuko had kept losing and gotten mad about it, making a grab at Fujino and causing an uproar, and so the teacher, not wanting to deal with the trouble, had decided that nobody was allowed to bring playing cards to school anymore.

"Well, when problems crop up, come give 'er a hand, Ms. Student Rep. We'll be countin' on ya."

"Huh?"

True, Tetty Goodgripp was the class's student rep, more or less. But Group Two's problems should be resolved by Group Two—in other words, their group leader, Mephis Pheles. That was when Tetty realized Group Two was talking about how their leader might start a fight with the new student. She doubted the very person who started a fight would be able to resolve any problems herself.

She glanced over at Miss Ril to see her smiling weakly—*"You poor dear,"* that expression seemed to be saying.

Rappy was smiling happily, waving both hands at her.

As for Dory, something must have happened, as her eyebrows were angled downward and she was bopping Arlie on the head. Arlie was looking down with a sad expression and letting herself be bopped.

"What are you doing?" Miss Ril asked.

"For real, cut that out!" Rappy joined in.

"Come on, you two; these fights are silly," Tetty said, and with the help of the other two, they pulled the sisters apart. Despite being a set who were generally glued at the hip, they snapped at each other out of nowhere. It was hard to tell whether they were actually friends.

While calming Dory, she thought about how she didn't want anyone causing problems. This was an exhausting class, with no lack of kids who would make trouble, though, or seemed like they would, this transfer student included. But somehow, Fujino was attached to them. Maybe it was because this was the first class she'd ever coordinated as the class rep.

◇ **Halna Midi Meren**

Two candelabra sat on the metallic table, one on each side. The flickering, wavering sources of light illuminated a mage sitting in a chair and another standing behind said chair. The young woman sitting in the chair, Halna, did not conceal her foul mood. She scowled while the woman of around the same age who stood beside her, Calkoro, shifted her gaze about restlessly, letting her eyes wander aimlessly to the curtains or potted plants, tightly squeezing the brim of the tricorn hat she held against her chest as if it would be a shield to protect herself.

With the *clack, clack* of each opening lock, the room became a notch more suffocating. When the second and then the third were unlocked in succession and the heavy fetters were laid on the table, Calkoro audibly swallowed. Halna glared at her out of the corner of her eyes.

Calkoro may have been a talented mage, but she lacked emotional maturity, and that meant she wasn't the greatest teacher. A timid and overly cautious person who bent to others' opinions would have students looking down on her in any schoolhouse—to say the least of when you were dealing with magical girls.

Only the security homunculi dispassionately continued working, stacking leg cuffs over the arm cuffs, removing the helmet that covered the head using three types of screwdrivers, until all the restraints were taken off of the girl in front of them.

Calkoro swallowed again, and Halna sniffed.

The girl's brilliant silver hair reflected the flickering light of the two candles, her graceful legs extending from the skirt of her uniform. Her healthy figure didn't look like it had just been released from prison to the outside world, while by contrast, her eyes, narrowed against the light, lacked in vitality and luster.

The magical girl didn't even glance at the black humanoid figures that stood guard at her sides, looking at Halna, then Calkoro, then Halna again, before shaking her head. Her silver hair, cut evenly at a short length, swayed, fully regaining its original shape in under a second. The gesture could have been merely an expression of her weariness, or intended as a scoff at the two mages, or because she simply didn't like the position of her hair. No life or emotion showed in her eyes. There was no way to guess at what she might be thinking, or if she was even thinking at all.

Was this just how she was? Or was she suppressing her expression to keep herself from being read?

Halna stroked her pointed ears, not even offering a polite smile as she folded her fingers in front of her chest. She faced the magical girl in an unmannerly pose, sitting on her chair with her chest puffed out and hands folded on the table, and in a tone that was even more difficult to describe as friendly, she said, “Your name?”

The magical girl narrowed her eyes a bit, with no sign of responding, and Halna’s brow furrowed even deeper. Calkoro stared at the carpet and her own toes buried in it. Halna made no attempt to hide the bite in her voice as she repeated, “Your name?”

“Kana,” the magical girl answered briefly. Calkoro breathed a sigh of relief, while Halna snorted in displeasure. The cause of her displeasure was 80 percent the magical girl and 20 percent Calkoro’s timidity.

“You will respond as promptly as possible,” said Halna.

“Okay. Like this?”

Halna cleared her throat in a deliberate-sounding way before she continued. Rather than replying to the magical girl’s question, she continued as if the girl had asked nothing. “I am Halna Midi Meren, and I’m in charge of this school. This is the teacher for your class, Calkoro Culumff. Her magical-girl name is Calkoro.”

“Good to meet you, Halna. It’s good to meet you, Calkoro.”

“Don’t call us by our given names. Address us as teachers.”

“Pardon me, Ms. Meren.”

After clearing her throat once more, Halna continued. “You made mistakes and were imprisoned for it. Your past cannot be erased. However, you have been given the right to attempt to atone for your crimes… Do you understand how extremely lucky you are?”

Kana tilted her head. She didn’t seem to understand.

Halna went on as if she hadn’t seen that. “The old prisons were solely for locking away criminals. It was highly doubtful there was any functional point to them, no honorable mission of giving convicts a chance to reflect on their actions… That was how the prisoners saw it.” She paused for a moment. She waited for Kana’s tilted head to right itself again before continuing, “But now, the prisons are different. Not only are prisoners given the opportunity to reflect, they can demonstrate what they’ve learned via their actions. Locking up trash serves no purpose.” She put particular emphasis on the word “trash,” with a strong bite as if spitting it out. “But through service, that trash…the sinful can engage with society.

Rather than being called by an inmate number, a piece-of-trash criminal, something worth less than vomit, you can be treated like an individual magical girl." She once again stressed the word "trash."

The magical girl—Kana—slowly shook her head. Halna eyed her with suspicion. "What is it?" she asked.

"My memories were erased. I don't know anything about me being a criminal."

A long moment of emptiness passed. Neither Halna nor Kana reacted at all, not even a twitch of eyebrows or cheeks, both of them staring at each other. Trembling, Calkoro squeezed the brim of her hat even tighter.

Halna drew her cheeks into a strained smile. "Robbing a prisoner of their right to reflect on their actions is the height of pointlessness."

"I agree."

"No chattering without being spoken to."

"My pardon."

Halna folded her fingers together again, and leaning forward slightly more than before—she figured this would give off the air she was trying for—she drew her jaw back. "All you need to think about is being mannerly, obedient, not causing problems, and being useful to others. Don't talk too much, generally sit waiting in the corner, and only work as much as necessary when it is demanded from you. Expect no commendation, ignore any scorn, and make modesty your principle. Even self-abasing is acceptable—consider that you are being allowed to live in order to serve, and that without service, your life is worthless."

Halna muttered a few words of a spell, swiftly moving the fingers of her left hand. A piece of paper appeared from thin air, which she sent gliding a few feet over the table, and Kana caught it right before it hit her in the chest. Written on the paper in very small print was a list.

"This is your background," said Halna. "Memorize it."

"My background isn't that I'm a prisoner doing community service?"

Deep wrinkles carved in Halna's brow. "This isn't a prison; it's a school. Ostensibly, it's a facility for the education of young people. Do you think we can openly announce that we've had you transfer in as part of a prisoner-reform program? Of course not; what a

ludicrously trash concept."

Halna snorted, rapping on the desk with the tip of her right index finger. The two homunculi came up at Kana's sides and took her by her arms; unmoved, Kana looked back at Halna, whose gaze was more irritated than anything else. "Know your place and don't forget that you are a cursed wrongdoer, but keep that to yourself; don't tell anyone. I'm sure magical girls like you are good at pretending to be good people."

"Does anyone else know about my background?"

"Me—the one in charge—Calkoro here, and you. No one else."

Calkoro flinched at hearing her name. It was such a violent response that Halna felt sorry for her. She was muttering something that sounded like excuses under her breath.

But Halna ignored that with a wave of her hand. Two homunculi dragged Kana out of the room. "Don't forget—you're always being monitored," Halna called out after her.

Then once the door closed, Halna dropped her head back, bent it forward, and returned it to the center position. "Some criminal, acting so full of herself," she said with a sigh.

She wasn't actually that angry, but she acted as if she was, since she had no idea where Calkoro might discuss her mood. Being the person in charge mad with rage about the Caspar Faction's abuses of power would be the easiest thing to make that notorious usurper —Pythie Frederica—believe.

Before Calkoro could make a comment, Halna slammed the desk with her fist, making Calkoro snap her mouth shut and drop her eyes to her feet. The scared woman focused all of her attention there as she dug her feet into the carpet.

Paying her no mind, Halna continued. "Is the Caspar Faction trying to play slick games with me? Do they understand that this isn't just about the faction—that the future of the Magical Kingdom hangs on this enterprise? To think they would take on the responsibility of sending their best and then drop a prisoner on us… As long as they're powerful, then character isn't an issue, is that it? Believing such incredibly archaic ideas will be accepted is the sort of thoughtlessness I'd expect from the Caspars."

A full ten seconds after Halna finished griping, Calkoro spoke hesitantly. "Their faction…has always been like that, you know."

There was a cajoling tone in her voice, and Halna didn't like it. But what irritated Halna more than what Calkoro said was how

clearly she could see that Calkoro feared her deficits. Halna bitterly cleared her throat and did not respond to Calkoro's comment.

◇ Calkoro

Not a single day had passed since her assignment to Class 2-F when Calkoro didn't have a stomachache. In day-to-day classes, all the kids lacked any motivation or talent, while during events, they all got carried away and caused trouble for everyone else—there was absolutely nothing good about the group for their teacher. Why had she been forced to make that rule that they couldn't play cards on lunch breaks? Why couldn't these kids at least pretend to get along? Calkoro couldn't understand it.

The students were all management candidates sent in from each faction, and none of them gave a rat's ass about their teacher's authority. On her big day—the beginning of her teaching career—Calkoro opened the classroom door brimming with determination. *I have to be teacherly*, she'd thought, but the moment she'd seen this postapocalyptic-looking girl with her hair in a mohawk and a facial tattoo to boot, that determination fell to pieces: *Oh, what's the use?*

And then there was her boss. Her one superior at the school, the principal Helen Midi Meren, could not be called incompetent by any measure. She was from a prestigious family that ranked up there with the Sage Chêne Osk Baal Mel, with skills in magical techniques that rivaled specialists, eyes that could penetrate into the soul, and the strictness to carry out decisions to adopt or eliminate without hesitation. And her appearance was absolutely striking, with the mage-like traits of pointed ears and eyes of different colors, but she also had soft, beautiful features, creating a perfect balance. Halna would sometimes keep things peaceful and occasionally flip a table in anger, and she had the outstanding political ability to tie everything to her benefit and make use of everything she had. She was a great among greats, having risen to deputy chief of the Information Bureau at an unprecedented young age.

She was worthy of respect, but as for whether Calkoro could respect her personality—that was not the case.

The Puk Faction had been pushing for the establishment of a magical-girl school, but the Osk Faction had used the incident Puk

Puck had caused as an opportunity to steal it away from them. That was fine; the problems came afterward.

Now that it was no longer solely a Puk Faction enterprise, the further the plans went along, the more self-proclaimed "assistance" joined in. It had begun with a tug-of-war within the Osk Faction, and in the end, the Caspar Faction and other influential aristocrats were sending in their own magical girls to expand the program, and it had turned the school that was supposed to have been for raising magical girls into the stage for a proxy war.

Halna had been in charge of the project, pushing for this enterprise ever since it had been snatched from the Puk Faction, so this was absolutely not the outcome she wanted, but it wasn't as if she could completely ignore the balance of power. Sneaking into the school to act as the principal here so she could manage things directly, at least, had to be the most she could do.

When the Puk Faction had been the parent organization, they had done two successful test runs here. And they were now making use of the data from those tests—in other words, they'd gone through an alpha and beta edition, and now they were getting started in earnest. Apparently, the plan had been to keep the same teacher as well, but unfortunately—rather, of *course*—that teacher had been a member of the Puk Faction. Like the majority of those affiliated with the Puk Faction, her name was erased from the register, so they wound up looking for anyone at all for the time being—they'd just had to find a mage who could transform into a magical girl. And so, they'd turned to one student who'd been diligently studying around the clock to become an authority in criminology: Calkoro. She could transform into a magical girl, and based on that alone, she'd been tossed out into the completely different field of education.

And that was how that legendary woman who was always in a mood had become Calkoro's boss.

Just getting through the day without any major screwups required quick wits, preparation, and consideration, and the bar for such a day was far higher than what Calkoro had imagined. Nothing was good enough to satisfy Halna.

"Pardon me," Calkoro called, knocking on the door to the teacher's office before entering.

The silver-haired magical girl Kana had seated herself at the center of the long table and was staring at Calkoro. To an outsider,

it looked more like Calkoro was the one being interviewed.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"I am," Kana replied.

Calkoro took a moment to mull over her next words. "I suppose you've forgotten what I said before."

"Just what did I forget?" Kana said plainly, her face expressionless.

Calkoro almost got the crazy idea that she was the one doing something bad. She cleared her throat and continued. "Classes are divided into general education and magical-girl education. You will attend the former while untransformed and the latter while in your magical-girl form."

"I see." Kana pushed her chair back and stood. "Then let's go. Show me around."

Calkoro wondered what to do next. She had meant to say, *"Please undo your transformation before going to class,"* but Kana seemed not to have picked up on that. Calkoro couldn't help but feel like Kana was only pretending she didn't get the hint.

Basically, it made sense to assume that Kana didn't want to show her human form. The sort of magical girl who would be locked up in a prison would not actually be middle school age in the first place.

As an expert in criminology, Calkoro knew there was no precedent for someone to be judged beyond reform at middle school age or below. If Kana detransformed, it would clearly expose that she was not a middle schooler. That was why she was pretending she didn't notice and was trying to push through the order.

Calkoro drew back her jaw and let out a little breath, then gestured to the meeting room door. "…Well then, let's go."

She would let it go—this time. She would report it to Halna, even knowing that it would anger her, and then look into how it might be dealt with. That way, it would make Halna the one picking a fight with the Caspar Faction—the ones who'd shoved Kana in here—and Calkoro would not take the brunt of it. If Calkoro took issue with her behavior now, then the worst-case scenario would be the Caspar Faction becoming upset with her.

Calkoro had learned how to stay out of danger. Mages with magical-girl abilities were lonely creatures. Magical girls didn't think of them as one of the group. They thought of them as the dogs of political authorities. The aristocrats of the Magical Kingdom, on

the other hand, treated them as items of convenience and did not call them comrades.

So Calkoro had to manage danger delicately and adapt to the needs of the moment. But there would be further opportunities for her boss to yell at her. Halna was already in a foul mood, after having this magical girl straight from prison shoved off on them, so if Calkoro allowed any further unruliness, Halna would get three times more angry than usual. And so Calkoro's stomach hurt.

Calkoro spared a glance behind her as she and Kana walked down the hallway. Kana's uniform was torn in various places. What was that about? She couldn't have been given secondhand clothes.

"What's going on with your clothes?" asked Calkoro.

"This is my uniform."

"No, I know that. But it's damaged in places."

"I made some adjustments so that it's easier to move in."

"…Right."

Calkoro felt the same uneasiness she had when she'd seen that mohawk on Diko. It was best to throw her hands up; this was none of her concern. She would simply make a note of it later.

CHAPTER 2
RISE! BOW! BE SEATED!

◇ **Kumi-Kumi**

Adelheid returned from her jaunt off to Group One. She folded her arms, tilted her head, and shrugged as she said, “Looks like Group One don’t know nothin’, either, huh?” She came off less like “hammy foreigner” and more like “hillbilly.” Mephis swung her braid to and fro, clicking her tongue as she muttered, “Useless,” irritably. Adelheid had to have heard that, but she looked unperturbed, giving a snort in return.

Classical Lillian looked over at Mephis and then hesitantly glanced at Adelheid. Seeing that she didn’t seem angry, Lillian let out a sigh of relief and next looked over at Kumi-Kumi.

Lillian had the sickly pallor of a shut-in, her hair grown wild with not enough care, and the eyes of a stage-five clinger. To be blunt, her existence itself was obnoxious. Kumi-Kumi could safely say she’d never befriend someone like that if they’d been classmates at a normal school. However, since Kumi-Kumi considered herself to be the mediator of Group Two, she couldn’t brush this girl aside.

The trio of Kumi-Kumi, Mephis, and Lillian were members of the Elite Guard.

They did count as career magical girls, more or less, but the job was nothing more than a gravy train. They only had to show up at some ceremonies a few times a year. Just doing the job normally, you’d never advance. Kumi-Kumi didn’t say it out loud, but she hoped she could graduate without any issues and get promoted.

So though they weren’t close enough to say they were bonded by shared ambitions or anything, well, there was basically something you could call a relationship. But their connection with Adelheid was nothing more than a temporary system of

cooperation. She was a member of the Department of Diplomacy, and who knew how long they could be on friendly terms with them. That wasn't a crowd she wanted to anger.

Kumi-Kumi took a few breaths, organizing her thoughts as she looked at Adelheid. "Maybe it was…thoughtless, in the first place… to think she'd know…because she's the student rep."

"Yeah, but there ain't no other gals who'd know anythin'."

Mephis muttered, "She's supposed to be the student rep! Ask this stuff!" and kicked the leg of the desk. When she'd first joined the class, she'd seemed pretty glad about being able to reunite with a fellow magical girl from her elementary school days, but now she wouldn't talk to her—in fact, she'd get grumpy just from someone bringing up Tetty.

But from Kumi-Kumi's perspective, that time she'd forgotten her lunch during the field trip in May, Tetty, Miss Ril, and Rappy had been the ones to go to all their classmates and gather a bit from each of their lunches for her, so she couldn't think too badly of them. She understood that telling Mephis she didn't think they were bad girls would make her mad, so she didn't try to argue with her openly.

All that aside, Mephis was still too noisy. Kumi-Kumi turned to her. "Mephis…you should talk quieter."

"Shut your piehole. Don't order me around." Mephis was easily angered all the time, but she was unusually on edge that day.

Mephis didn't possess the qualities of an elite with great hopes for her future in the first place. Maybe she was suited to being a warrior, but she was not at all cut out to be a student. She'd get mad over every little thing and disturb the peace of the class.

Mephis's temper had also been the reason playing cards had been banned, right around the time Kumi-Kumi had thought she might be finally getting the knack of *Millionaire*. Kumi-Kumi figured that if you were going to get angry over something like getting your joker followed up by a three of spades, then you shouldn't be playing games at all. Mephis had grabbed Tetty by the lapels, and then when Rappy had tried to stop her, Mephis had kicked her down, too. She'd basically ended her association with her old friend herself.

Before Mephis had entered this school, she'd been an antisocial type, even out of magical-girl form. With her classic delinquent style of bleached hair and hardly any eyebrows, she'd started fights

with anyone and everyone. It was not appropriate behavior for an Elite Guard who protected important people, but she was surprisingly capable of turning it off for work, so she'd somehow been managing without ever crossing the line where she'd be dismissed.

But she'd assumed that she had to dress properly to start at this school and had even pasted on hair growth serum on her eyebrows and fixed up her appearance. But then when she actually joined the class, there'd been people with dyed hair, people with updos, and even someone with a mohawk and tattoos. Mephis had snapped, like, *"Why am I the only one who has to pretend to be a good girl?"* and she'd been angry more often than not ever since.

Between Mephis and Lillian, Kumi-Kumi thought the two of them could make themselves slightly more socially acceptable. She wanted at least half of Group One to pretend to be good girls.

"Anyway, Group One was thinkin' the same thing as us," said Adelheid. "That numberwise, the transfer student'll probably come join our crew. Well, this is gonna be a rough time, Ah reckon."

"I know that without you spelling it out, shit-for-brains," spat Mephis.

"Oh, and th'other thing. They knew she's an ex-con, too."

"Fucking hell." The foul language Mephis spewed when she was mad was kind of like a dog barking, so nobody paid it any mind. "It's fucked up that the higher-ups haven't told me anything. Shit."

"Ah ain't heard nothin', neither."

"I know. We already heard that. Asshat."

No information had come to them from the Elite Guard about the transfer student aside from "She just got out of prison." Adelheid's Department of Diplomacy was also staying out of it, and she'd even told them she hadn't been able to learn anything from making full use of the Archfiend Cram School's information network.

"I'm asking why there's no info about the transfer student, you piece of shit," Mephis continued.

"Well, we were sayin' it *seems* like she'd join up with us here in Group Two, numberwise. If there's some kind o' reason, she might join a different group."

"Some kind of reason? Like what?"

"We have to think about that together," said Lillian.

Kumi-Kumi folded her arms, Mephis clenched her fists,

Adelheid looked up at the ceiling, and Lillian looked at the ground, and none of them spoke for a while, a wordless time passing them by. Eventually Adelheid nodded, Mephis snorted, Kumi-Kumi unfolded her arms, and Lillian let out a sigh.

"All right… Y'all don't got no constructive ideas?" Adelheid asked.

"What?" Mephis snorted. "Your first suggestion is that we should offer some good ideas? Gimme a damn break."

"Hey now, this ain't the first suggestion; that's just what we were all thinkin'. Y'all were thinkin' like, ain't there any good ideas, Ah'd like to know about the transfer student at least, right?"

"How about going to Group Three to ask if they know anything?" Lillian suggested.

"No way. They've never been useful at times like these before, shit."

"'Cause you're always startin' fights with 'em, Mephis," said Adelheid.

"What? You're making it my fault?"

"Ah don't start fights with mah friends."

"Oh, no, um, sorry, ah, pardon me," Lillian stuttered.

Even if they did shoot down Lillian's idea, it wasn't like Mephis or Adelheid were coming up with anything great, either, so in the end, the four of them just put their heads together to groan and go *hmm*, far from helping their situation.

Seeing the exchange between the other three, Kumi-Kumi thought things over—and then an idea came to her.

Mephis was the type to resort to violence before thinking things through. Adelheid was a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School—in other words, she was a specialist in fighting. Meanwhile, Lillian was preoccupied with what she should do to keep the others from getting mad at her. Furthermore, Kumi-Kumi herself required more time than most for coming up with plans. In other words, Group Two had no one to be their brains.

The Elite Guard did have members who were in charge of intellectual labor, who were good at things like devising training plans, accounting and receipts, managing personnel, and commanding units. But being restricted only to those whose human forms were middle school age, the only options were Mephis, Lillian, and Kumi-Kumi. The trio was made up of exactly one type of person: the brawns. When they got stuck, they couldn't use their

heads to get out of it.

Like for the book-report contest. Despite having all gotten together to discuss while writing them, to make sure there was as much variation between them as possible, their overall grades had fallen below even Group One, which had the Arlie and Dory sisters with their shaky language skills, into last place. And even when playing cards, Mephis had snapped over a move that hadn't even been against the rules, and during their night march, only Group Two had read the map wrong and strayed off course. And Kumi-Kumi finally figured it out after listing out all of this, so she couldn't laugh at the other members.

I see, so that's what it is, Kumi-Kumi thought. However, she had enough discretion to know if she said it out loud, it would just make Mephis mad, so she stayed silent. They discussed things until the teacher arrived, and ultimately came to the conclusion: "We hope we get someone good."

◇ Kana

Following Calkoro, Kana went through a door that had *F* written on the plaque.

The bustling sounds that had been audible from the hallway instantly stopped. This small classroom was filled right to left with magical girls—or rather, girls who were not transformed. Their gazes gathered on one point—Kana. There were fourteen students, and they all had to be magical girls. The large blackboard that looked like it had been shoved in there, the cheap-looking desks made of wood and pipe, and the similarly cheap chairs were not what Kana envisioned would be appropriate for magical girls. But just like the uniforms that Kana and all the others wore, perhaps that was what made it school-like.

"Ummm…this is Kana, the transfer student. Treat her well."

For some reason, Calkoro's introduction sounded hesitant, but Kana went along with it, voicing just a brief "hi" before going where the teacher directed to take a seat at the center rear. The class began, and though nobody was staring right at her, she could sense so keenly it was painful that their attention was on her. Her classmates didn't look at her with the kindness to unconditionally welcome the newcomer, but neither were they coldly and

unconditionally excluding her, either. It felt as if *evaluating* would be the most accurate, but she also got the feeling that wasn't quite right. Complex emotions seemed to fill their eyes, and Kana was bad at intuiting complex emotions. They were called complicated because they were difficult to read.

The curriculum was general education, just as she'd been told. Everyone diligently opened their textbooks, pencils racing across their notebooks. Kana had arrived empty-handed, no textbook, notebook, or pencil. Calkoro noticed this within thirty seconds of the class starting and instructed the student sitting beside Kana to show her the textbook, and the class resumed.

Bringing nothing with you to a place dedicated to study was far from how a student should be. You could say Yoshioka was responsible for not having given her anything, but Kana didn't need to use magic to know that blaming others in this situation was not the way a student should be, either.

For now, she decided to thank the student beside her. Her hair was cut short and she had tanned skin. Her physique was on the smallish side but sturdily built overall, and though there was still a hint of childishness to her face, her features looked tough; you might say such features were appropriate for an elite educational institution. Kana lowered her voice and said to her, "Thanks… What's your name?"

The words *Kumiko Tateno, Kumi-Kumi* rose in her mind, while after that, the girl herself answered in a quiet voice, "Kumi-Kumi… I don't think…you need to thank me."

Kana hadn't been sure from her looks if she was boy or a girl, but her voice was very girlish. Mentally apologizing that she'd been unable to determine her gender and also that she'd unintentionally activated her magic, Kana followed along with the class in the relevant parts of the textbook. Since she couldn't do anything about not having a notebook and pencil, she decided to remember to bring some next time. Call it a silver lining, perhaps, but since her memory had been erased, there was a fair amount of space for remembering new things.

The class was reading the textbook and writing on the blackboard, and it was cut off when the bell rang, ending in the middle of things. Calkoro left the classroom in haste, and they got a short break.

Just as Kana had anticipated, a crowd of people gathered

around her. The students surrounded her and, after introducing themselves, began bombarding her with questions.

"Why're you transformed?"

"A magical girl doesn't need a reason to transform," Kana answered.

They were all murmuring to one another, for some reason. They seemed impressed, although Kana didn't understand why.

"It looks like your uniform's torn!"

"I adjusted it to make it easier to move," Kana replied.

"You have such pretty hair."

"Thank you."

"Did you forget your stuff? Like your textbook and notebook?"

"I'll bring them tomorrow."

"Kana…what sort of magic do you have?"

The murmuring lessened. The one to ask that last question had been a girl with long black hair who had introduced herself as Princess Lightning.

There was no way other magical girls wouldn't be curious about her magic. After that question came up, the chattering ebbed, and everyone focused their attention on Kana, listening closely so they wouldn't miss what she said.

Kana remained in her seat, looking back at Lightning's face as she pondered whether it would be a problem to answer, or if Yoshioka would get angry at her later. She then nodded. "My magic is that I can know the answers to questions."

After a silence of a little less than a second, the girls burst into whispering:

"What does that mean?"

"Sounds complicated."

"That's your magic?"

"She seems like a tomboy."

A thin smile came to Lightning's lips as she asked, "So what does that mean, in other words?"

"I ask someone a question."

"Right."

"Then the correct answer comes to my mind without having to wait for their response."

"Ohhh, *that's* what you mean."

The commotion grew even louder. Lightning's shapely eyebrows twitched up, and her thin smile broadened slightly. "So you can

learn anything?"

"If the other person knows it."

"For example, hmm…you could find out my birthday, couldn't you? How about you try it out?"

Kana slowly shook her head. Lightning seemed confused. "What do you mean? You can learn anything, can't you?"

"That'd be an invasion of privacy."

"But I'm giving you permission to ask that question."

"There's a lot of reasons why I can't ask."

"Tell me."

Kana spread the fingers of her right hand, folding down each finger, starting from her thumb, to count.

First, it was an invasion of privacy. And since the answer that rose in her mind was dependent on that person's point of view, if the one she questioned believed a lie to be the truth, that would distort the answer. And the biggest reason was that she would uncover things she shouldn't know. This was all just what Yoshioka had told her, but those reasons were enough to satisfy Kana, too.

When she said that those were the reasons that she'd forbidden herself from using her magic too much, Lightning nodded. "That's quite reasonable."

Kana felt the heat that had been starting to rise ebb away. The whispers died down, and Lightning lowered her head and turned around before taking her leave. Many of the girls scattered, leaving the crowd, talking to one another as they went.

The handful who remained explained to Kana about the school or talked to her about the class. She could understand from the reactions of these girls that this was out of kindness rather than that stingingly tense curiosity from before. The girls' interest in Kana had faded. They probably assumed she didn't want to show them her magic. Just like with the matter of the textbook, she couldn't push the responsibility for that on another and say, *"It was because Yoshioka said so."*

"Hey."

Kana looked up to see who had spoken to her. It was a girl with long black hair hanging freely over her costume like a veil. Yes, she was a magical girl. Half her face was hidden behind a white sheep mask, and bat-like wings grew from her back. There was murmuring around them. Those who'd left the crowd turned to look, too. Someone asked her, "What're you doing?" Whether she'd

heard that or not, this girl looked down on Kana, smiling like she was trying to provoke her.

Kana could tell this girl was trying to start something. But if a problem came up here and Kana was expelled, that would mean a U-turn back to prison. Keeping the volume and pitch of her voice the same as during the earlier questioning, Kana pushed back in her chair and faced the girl with her whole body. “What is it?”

“We heard you came here from the clink,” the girl replied.

“What’s a clink?”

“A prison, okay, a prison.”

The murmuring receded. Kumi-Kumi started reaching out from behind that girl but drew her hand back with a strained expression and put her hand to her forehead instead. Judging from her reaction, it seemed she’d known that Kana had come from the clink —from prison, rather. And the feeling in the air told her this was not the crowd’s first time hearing this.

Despite the whole prison having emptied out, ensuring the staff wasn’t around, information had been leaked anyway. But even if she did blame Yoshioka now, nobody would listen. She had to make her own decisions to get out of this.

Halna had forbidden Kana from telling anyone. However, judging from everyone’s reactions, she was certain they already knew.

Kana took a breath, putting a certain amount of weight in it, then nodded. “That’s right.” If everyone knew, then what point was there in lying now? Kana thought this was better than to be thought someone who couldn’t be trusted because she lied and tried to hide things. Well, that was about 60 percent of the reason, while the other 40 percent was because it was too much hassle at this point.

A girl—she had introduced herself as Tetty—timidly came forward and said, “Fuuko.”

“Don’t call me by my real name!”

“Ah, sorry… Listen, Mephis, we’re not supposed to be transformed right—”

“She was transformed first!” The magical girl—Mephis—kicked down a nearby chair, and the loud noise made Tetty jump and shrink away. It looked like she was trying to say something, but when her mouth opened, nothing came out.

Clicking her tongue at Tetty’s reaction, Mephis turned back to Kana again. “I just wanna talk on an equal basis, okay? That means

I've gotta be transformed, too."

The corners of her lips, painted with a rouge as red as blood, turned upward in a smile. Between the wings, her expression, and her attitude, she was the very picture of a demon that would appear in epic poetry or illustrated stories. "Stand up."

Kana's body moved before she gave it any thought.

Kana put her hands on her desk and pushed back her chair, and as she was about to stand up, Mephis's feet moved. It seemed like she was trying to sweep her legs out from under her. Various methods of evasion rose in Kana's mind—blocking with her shin, stopping it with the sole of her foot, somersaulting to avoid it—as her body was flung up in the air, spinning one and a half times, and right when she was about smack into the floor, she guarded her face with both hands, avoiding those strikes, at least. But a pressure on the back of her head pushed her down, and her forehead hit the floor.

The pressure on the back of her head immediately disappeared, and still lying on her front, Kana raised her face. Mephis was standing above her with an expression that went beyond challenging; it was scornful. Mephis was looking down on her. Belatedly, Kana realized that the pressure she felt on the back of her head was Mephis's foot. Mephis was stepping on her. Kana imagined she was the perfect representation of humiliation right now. The murmuring of the classmates had faded out at some point. She felt their eyes on her only.

Kana didn't know why this magical girl had become violent, but Mephis's actions had embarrassed Kana. Her reputation hadn't been great to begin with, and now it was even worse. Thinking this far, she judged that inaction was unacceptable. Whether she received a baptism of further violence or if being stepped on was the end of it, either way, the damage to Kana's reputation had been done.

Kana judged her options. It wasn't as if she needed a good reputation, but one that was too poor would be a hindrance to her activities. She had to do something to improve her standing.

She rolled over on the spot to her back so that she could move more freely and also see better. As Kana moved, Mephis raised up her foot, but Kana had expected that. The moment her heel came down, Kana stared up at her without a blink, stuck out her index finger, and pointed. "Only your underwear is white. You don't think that color scheme is lacking in overall balance?"

Since the heel came down on her immediately after that, Kana never saw her reaction, but she felt as if a sort of upset was communicated through the sole of her shoe. You could say that Kana's plan to make use of language for emotional damage rather than responding to violence with violence had basically been a success. Taking the heel with her sturdy forehead had also kept the physical damage to a minimum.

Satisfied by these results as she took that heel to the head over and over, Kana gave a little nod.

◇ Tetty Goodgripp

The bell rang, the teacher came into the classroom, everyone returned to their own seats, and the class began as if nothing had happened. Second period that day was Japanese.

As the teacher was explaining the function of particles, Fujino was about to feel very anxious, but she didn't have the time for that. She had to check Arlie's and Dory's workbooks. Since the condition for getting into this class was being a magical girl, their academic abilities as humans were all over the spectrum, but these two weren't even at the level to be taking middle school classes in the first place, so they followed an independent-study curriculum, doing work directed at younger students. They'd arranged a system where Fujino, being the group's leader, would check their work in class whenever she had the opportunity. Maybe this was just a result of the teacher's lack of motivation, but Fujino wasn't about to complain. Nothing good would come of being considered a problem child. She wanted the teacher to think of her as a good, hardworking student who would do as she was told.

It would surely feel great to do whatever she wanted, like what Mephis and the transfer student did. In that fight earlier, Mephis had used violence to knock the transfer student down, while the transfer student had committed to nonaggression but nevertheless had not bowed her head to Mephis. Even if they'd chosen different angles, they'd both shown their strength. You couldn't even compare them to their student rep, who'd gotten flustered over a chair getting kicked and had failed to manage the situation.

Fujino finished checking Arlie's and Dory's exercise books, then sat back down and faced forward. Finally, she had the time to feel

that crushing weight on her shoulders.

Back when Tetty Goodgripp had still been not even a newbie magical girl but a candidate about to take the magical-girl exam, her examiner had lectured her countless times, telling her, “Being a magical girl won’t make you any money. You just lose time. By the time you realize what your youth was worth, it’s already too late.” She’d even said, “Though ostensibly we say the most highly ambitious candidates will get official appointments, if anything, the people who are fine keeping it as a hobby are easier to appoint. Or people with rich families.”

Mephis Pheles, who had become a magical girl along with Tetty, had snapped back at that with “What a stupid thing to say.” While Tetty had consoled Mephis, in her mind, she’d been rebelling just as hard.

No matter how adults lecture you and tell you *“Only a handful of people can be successful in this business; you should aim for something more stable,”* there aren’t many good girls who will listen and go, *“Oh, okay then.”* There are more children who will aim to be that “handful” of voice actors, actors, comedians, professional athletes, professional shogi or go players, singers, or manga artists, joining the business while fantasizing about sharing a shining stage with the stars they admire.

And it had been the same for Fujino Tohyama, who at the time had been an elementary schoolgirl ignorant in the ways of the world. When she’d found out that magical girls were real and had transformed herself into the adorable magical girl Tetty Goodgripp, her vague anxieties about the future had instantly evaporated. Before, she’d half-jokingly said to her friends, “Maybe I’ll get reborn into another world by some kind of mistake,” but it had in fact come true basically just like that. So no wonder she’d made up her mind to live as a magical girl in the future. Lectures from adults went in one ear and out the other.

Though Tetty had acted quiet and obedient in front of the examiner, in her heart, her rebellious spirit had been going wild. If she was going to become a magical girl, then she would absolutely make her living on that alone. And then down the road, she’d aim to get an anime. Even if she wouldn’t go so far as to expect the coveted Sunday-morning slot, she would somehow wedge herself into the late-night five-minute slot and capture the hearts of

subculture fans who liked easygoing daily life shows and make it a cult hit, and with the anime not having a huge budget to begin with anyway, it would even get a second season.

Keeping her thoughts to herself on how she was going to make it happen and how she'd show them, when she was officially appointed as a full-fledged magical girl, she'd been overflowing with the feeling that she could do anything. She'd even thought: Adults were easy, life didn't have that much to throw at you, she was destined for this, and dreams and goals existed for the sake of being fulfilled.

And she had been made to feel this even more strongly because of the presence of Mephis, who'd passed along with her, despite how aggressive she'd been with the examiner. If *she* could pass, of course you'd get the mistaken idea that life was easy.

And then, after becoming a magical girl, Fujino had just watched the time go by. She hadn't been able to gain anything in particular. She was never summoned by the Magical Kingdom, and the reports she wrote never even got a response. She asked the higher-ups if she could obscure her involvement with the Magical Kingdom while blogging or vlogging or something, but the only answer she got was "No." When she asked if she could make use of her charming appearance as a waitress with big mittens to do something like act as regional mascot, she got the answer "No," and even when she asked if she could serialize an original novel with herself as the protagonist as a complete fiction on a novel submission site, they said "No," and that was the end of that.

The regional leader said nastily that if Tetty kept asking all these weird questions, it would hurt her own reputation as well, so that was the last time she offered a proposal.

All she got out of it was mounting exhaustion. Practically every day she thought, *If I just didn't have school during the day, if I could just spend all my energy on magical-girl activities*, but even so, she couldn't abandon her lifestyle.

Fujino's mother had a weak constitution, but she'd force herself on and on if nobody stopped her. When Fujino was in fourth grade, her mother had divorced her father for cheating, so Fujino had changed schools, parting ways with Mephis. After that, Fujino's mother had struggled financially while she raised her daughter through elementary and middle school. She had cared for Fujino as a person.

Whatever Fujino did, whether she was going to school as an ordinary girl or working as a magical girl, what the examiner said came back to her mind. That the type of person who kept it to a hobby or had a rich family was most suited to be a magical girl. Even taken naively, Fujino did not fit those criteria.

One day, when a petty argument had turned into her yelling at her mother, she had realized that it couldn't go on like this. Four years had passed since she'd first become a magical girl. The examiner had been right to warn her of lost time, that her youth was valuable. Fujino was under such extreme stress that she wound up having arguments about trivial things.

While Fujino's limits loomed right in front of her, her mother had gone over the edge. One day, she swayed and collapsed to the ground, was taken to the hospital, then passed away there. Fujino vaguely remembered listening, dumbfounded, to the doctor's explanation that her heart had been weakened to exhaustion. Fujino regretted that her biggest final memory had been yelling at her mother, but she wasn't getting that time back. She should have at least made a verbal apology instead of silently letting things slide back to normal—the regrets piled on, but lost time could never be regained. There was no going back. Only forward.

This magical-girl class was her last great hope. When the Magical Kingdom had contacted her, she'd cried, thinking finally her dreams had become a reality. But this was merely a bud on the branch and not fruit yet. Still, it was way better than aimlessly working as a magical girl. She was sick of spending every day idling her time away.

Fujino was exempted from tuition, and even her living costs were guaranteed. If she was able to graduate without any issues, then it was clear to anyone who read those articles on "the graduates of elite education with flourishing careers in the other world" that she would be promised an assignment to a department. The proud expressions of the magical-girl students from the previous classes who'd made remarks at the entrance ceremony, and how they'd spoken of what they did in their careers now—with no small amount of boasting—had heated up Tetty's heart.

Those people were ultimately graduates of the test phase, while Tetty's class would be the first to graduate from the official operation. If even half of the exaggerated things they said, like "established with the dignity of these authorities," were true, then

there was no way she'd be treated badly. This was the professional magical girl she'd dreamed of being.

She didn't want anyone getting in her way. She would obey the teacher, bow her head to anyone, avoid problems, and bring about harmony in the class. Kicking someone because they pissed her off would only hurt herself in the long run. The time after graduation was far longer, so while she was a student, she would suck it up.

Fujino looked up. There was a tug at her arm. Dory was pulling on her right sleeve. When she turned around, Arlie was looking at her, too. Their two identical faces seemed to ask her, *"What's wrong?"* Fujino smiled to put them at ease, then picked up her exercise book.

She allowed herself to be subsumed by her anxiety for only a brief period. There was lots of work for the student rep, after all.

◇ Blade Brenda

She was at a small shrine on top of a mountain, one you had to race up countless steps to reach. On the old and worn shrine, the cracked stone paving, and the handrailing that went around the shrine grounds, all over there were the signs of repairs. It looked like it had been fixed up fairly recently.

Blade Brenda and Cannon Catherine were standing next to each other, their hands stiff and straight at their sides as they waited at full attention for directions. The magical girl in white who stood three steps away—Snow White—gave them orders: "You don't have to be so formal." The magical girl in blue, Princess Deluge, stood behind her, arms folded. Snow White didn't say anything particularly good or bad, so they ought to listen to her.

The pair immediately obeyed. Brenda sat down and crossed her legs, swaying right to left, while Catherine placed her cannon on the ground and laid her head on it like a pillow.

Seeing the two of them like that, Snow White waited a moment, then ordered, "Maybe a little more dignified," and so the pair lined up in a manner that was not too formal but also not too relaxed. "All right then, now we'll start cleaning."

The pair tilted their heads. With her right hand, Snow White held out a bucket by its handle toward them, and Brenda took it.

Inside were sponges, brushes, and plastic containers. “I went to get some magic sponges. There are enough for everyone, so don’t worry.”

Catherine got a bucket, too. The pair tilted their heads in the opposite direction from before.

“We’re cleaning the shrine, but not just the shrine,” Snow White explained. “We’ll also be cleaning all of the town that can be seen from here.”

Following after Snow White, the pair came up to the railing and looked down below. It was still daytime, so the sun was shining, and there were a lot of people. It was loud and bustling.

“There are various spots around town that have graffiti. You’ll clean it off, and if there are any people trying to do more, then you make sure to convince them to never do it again, and clean up the town. That’s the job we have to do.”

“The real big job will be a little down the line, so right now, let’s do what we can,” added Princess Deluge.

Brenda and Catherine both turned around to Snow White. Because she was backlit by the sun, they had a hard time seeing the expression on her face.

“You two, and Arlie and Deluge and I, are all magical girls,” said Snow White. “Helping people in trouble is one of a magical girl’s most important jobs.”

Brenda had never thought of herself as a magical girl. And she was sure Arlie and Catherine never had, either. Snow White, Pfle, Uluru, Patricia, Marika Fukuroi, and Shadow Gale were different from Brenda’s group.

She looked over at Deluge, wondering if she’d add anything further, but she remained silent with her arms folded. She seemed like she was worried about something—and also as if she were waiting for their reaction.

Brenda and Catherine faced each other, clonked their heads together, and had a whispered discussion before coming to a conclusion. Turning back to Snow White again, lined up side by side, they nodded.

“Good. Then it’s settled,” said Snow White. “So we’ll start here with the shrine.”

Catherine circled around to the back, Brenda polished the flagstones, and Snow White and Deluge went into the shrine. They could hear the squeaking sounds of polishing, the wind blowing

through, the leaves swishing, the charming cries of birds, and Snow White's and Deluge's voices talking.

"Apparently the transfer student who Frederica sent to the school really is a former prisoner," said Snow White.

"Yeah. Mana was real mad," Deluge replied.

"Well…I am, too. Um, this isn't something only Mana would be angry about."

"True."

"I think Frederica is plotting something… What do you think it is?"

"I feel like she's deliberately not hiding the information. Almost like…she's showing it off."

"I did hear that she had the whole prison emptied out to release the prisoner."

"But that's part of how the information got out, right?" Deluge pointed out. "I think if she were seriously trying to hide it, she could have sent in someone with an entirely different history and everything, saying *'This is who she is.'* But she didn't do that. She brought out this prisoner, and that was leaked before she transferred into the school, and Arlie and her classmates were talking about it, too, right?"

"That's what I've heard."

"Huh."

"Mm-hmm."

"Um…is Arlie doing well at school?" Deluge asked.

"She says there's someone helping her out and that she already made some friends. Studying is hard, but learning things one by one feels worthwhile, and she's actually having a good time. But she did say there's this one awful person there named Dory."

"You can't get along with everyone, after all."

"Yes…that's true."

"Uh-huh…"

Deluge had used the documents Pfle had left behind to get in contact with Snow White, and so the two magical girls had joined forces, but things between them were still a little awkward. When Brenda had been with Puk Puck, Snow White had been very reliable. When Brenda had said, "I'm counting on you like before," Snow White had looked sad, but she still really was reliable.

If Snow White and Deluge were getting along, then Brenda was happy, and Arlie and Catherine were glad, too.

Those two were working together to search for Ripple and beat Frederica. Brenda didn't really get what they were trying to do, but she thought it was very good that they could work hard together.

◇ Calkoro

Unlike the general education classes, the classes on magical girls and the Magical Kingdom were conducted with teacher and students transformed into magical girls. Seeing elite magical girls who bore the expectations of every faction all lined up together was a grand sight that put pressure on their new teacher, but after a month of it plus a long weekend, Calkoro had gotten somewhat used to it. She couldn't be longing to go back to holidays forever.

"The crimes of the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, can't be purely chalked up to her unique character…"

Calkoro had gotten used to it, yes, but she was still tense about teaching classes.

The students would never notice their teacher's anxieties.

"Giving rise to copycat criminals like Lake of Fire Flame Flamey…"

Some of them were rude, not focusing on the class, spinning pencils or looking out the windows. Mephis Pheles kept taking off and putting on her costume-accessory sheep mask. Rappy Taype made no attempt to hide her dour expression, occasionally even sighing. It was such a contrast from her usual cheer that it was annoying—in other words, the class was just that boring.

"And Flamey's offshoots, such as Killer Sawblade Saw Fran and Iron Wall Lili-Luluu…"

And then there was Kana. She was the only one not opening up a notebook or picking up a pen, but neither did she look away or fiddle with her hands, staring fixedly at the blackboard.

Calkoro was from an aristocratic family, albeit a lower-ranked one, and she had no trouble with studying at a desk or sedentary work. And since this class was on magical-girl criminals, which was in her field, she'd managed to teach it with middling interest. At least, until about halfway through April.

"She also had many subordinates, most notably a magical girl named Melville…"

The incident caused by the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry,

was said to have really shaken up the Magical Kingdom. Many mages and magical girls had been demoted or dismissed, and suspicious deaths of related parties had come one after another, written off as accidents or suicides. Such a major event had been an opportunity for the magical-girl system to be reformed, so Calkoro could understand the logic in thinking elite magical girls would have to learn about it.

But still, the lessons she'd been told to teach were still too lopsided toward the Cranberry incident.

"Many of the victims became aggressors. One of them was called Calamity Mary…"

There were plenty of other deeply interesting examples of magical-girl crime. More than its academic relevance, the issue with the Cranberry incident was that it had been a string of victories for Cranberry up until the final incident, so she was basically telling a story with a bad ending every day. There were so many other countless crimes with high entertainment value that would get your heart pounding just from looking into them. All Cranberry all the time stressed her out.

And so Calkoro had lost her interest in the class. But it seemed that had shown in her attitude, as Halna had given her the sort of reprimand that would make her sick to her stomach, and ever since, she'd faced this class with a sense of anxiety. Whatever it was, be it through listening devices or secret cameras, it seemed Halna was watching. So then she wasn't allowed to slack off.

"What do you think should have been done to keep a tragic event like this from happening? I will now be handing out papers, so everyone please write down your thoughts by the time the bell rings."

After class was done, Calkoro retrieved the papers she'd had the students write and returned to the individual room they were calling the teacher's office. Pulling the wheeled chair back from her steel desk, she turned it around and sat down. *All right*, she thought, fanning out her papers.

While they might all be called elite top students, there was a lot of variation here. That was exactly why Calkoro made use of

opportunities like this to get a grasp on their personality tendencies. That was also why she held little events periodically, even if it was a bit of a hassle.

For example, a single book report could give you a glimpse of their almost garish rainbow of individual characteristics. Lillian, who usually avoided drawing attention to herself, had been unfortunately conspicuous in referencing a love affair between men that didn't seem like it had been depicted, Mephis had gone so far as to quote statements from the author's social media to bash the book, Kumi-Kumi had reverse-calculated the author's income based off the number of copies published and most common royalty rates and had finished the essay off with the final line, "I'm very envious," and Adelheid had submitted a paper fully intended to be funny, like a script for a comic sketch, but despite her efforts, Calkoro had not laughed at all. Though the sort of book reports that would give you a headache just by reading them should not have been common, she was getting them in continuous succession.

Sure enough, the opinions of the students varied here as well.

Diko Narakunoin was the one pointing out most strongly, in an almost accusatory tone, the faults of the management system. Normally she wouldn't offer her opinions, but she would use surprisingly aggressive language at times like these. At first glance, her fashion sense had caused Calkoro despair, but it was fair to say she was one of the better students in the class.

Tetty Goodgripp had made full use of bureaucratic jargon to write an unreasonably obtuse paper. It was like an office report. Maybe she was used to writing documents like that. Even for the book report, rather than picking a book she liked, it felt like she'd picked something everyone else would be fine with, and the content was safe the whole way through. Trying to make something so faultlessly inoffensive that it wound up failing in that goal reminded her so much of herself; it was painful.

The careless and militant submission that featured only the single remark of *One of the examinees should have beaten Cranberry* was from Mephis Pheles. It even seemed as if she was looking for an opportunity to start a fight.

When Calkoro read Arlie's paper, which had *Do my best* in wobbly chicken scratch, she snorted, and seeing Dory's paper, which read, *I'd try real hard*, she tossed it on the desk and sighed.

The level of these magical girls was so low. She had to pretend

like she was motivated for Halna—why was it that even that felt too hard?

She bemoaned her wretched lot for a while, and then with an *okay, next*, she picked up a paper with nothing written on it. She turned it over, held it up to the light, squinted, and scrutinized it, but there wasn't a single thing written on it.

Was there an extra sheet mixed in there? Calkoro wondered, but for some reason, this bothered her. She tapped the rest of the stack of papers together on the table to line them up, then flipped through the upper corners with her thumb to check the names, doing a U-turn to check them again. There was one girl from the class whose name she didn't see: Kana.

Calkoro laid the stack of papers down on her desk and leaned into the backrest of her chair. The cheap rolling chair made a grating creak when it took her weight, but she didn't get up. She just stretched and looked up at the ceiling. The inside of the fluorescent light covers was filled with dust. There were even dead winged insects in there, wherever they'd come in from.

Calkoro didn't want to get involved with Kana. But now, suddenly, she was forced to think about her.

Submitting a blank sheet without even writing your name—what was the meaning of that? Kana being like she was, Calkoro couldn't see it as simple rebellion against the teacher or slacking.

For the sake of getting through her time as a teacher peacefully, with no major screwups, maybe she needed to probe a little more into what Kana was thinking.

CHAPTER 3
RUN, RUN, TRANSFER STUDENT, RUN

◇ **Kumi-Kumi**

There were a number of rules for the school lunch.

It was nothing dramatic. Just like the elementary school Kumi-Kumi had attended until third grade, it was all really obvious stuff, like "Avoid leaving food on your plate as much as possible," "Finish eating before lunchtime is over," "Submit a form beforehand about any allergies," "Serving duty is in a rotation, by group," and "When there are extras of popular items like pudding, then do rock-paper-scissors among those who want it to pick who gets it." And one of these rules was: "Eat your meal with your group."

The girls moved around the desks and chairs, lining them up to face one another for the meal, chatting just as much in between bites as to not get in the way of eating. Even if they'd only met that day, this was bound to help them make friends. There was something Kumi-Kumi wanted to talk about with this new classmate and new member of Group Two. While she was at it, she also had a word or two of caution she wanted to say to Mephis.

Or so she'd intended, but Kana finished her meal like lightning, dashing out of the classroom before Kumi-Kumi had the time to speak. A magical girl is far faster than a human. They even *eat* faster.

Though Kumi-Kumi had hardly been able to talk with Kana at all, she did manage to caution Mephis. But it was hard to say that went well, either. Kumi-Kumi had admonished Mephis countless times since she'd first gotten acquainted with her, but she couldn't think of a single time it had worked.

"Why…um, did you do something…so violent to Kana?" Kumi-Kumi asked.

“Oh, did I do something wrong? I didn’t, did I?” Mephis shot back. Adelheid shrugged with a deliberate-looking smile, while Lillian pretended not to hear anything and slurped her soup.

Mephis thrust her spork at the mumbling Kumi-Kumi. “You’re chickenshit, so I did you a favor by making a move. That told us lots of stuff, right? Like how good she is, if she’s the type who sucks it up or immediately loses it, if she’s got guts or can be intimidating. So then it’s fine, right? There’s no problem. This means you learned stuff ’cause I made a move for you, right? You’re always the first to complain, but you should appreciate stuff when it deserves it.”

That was all total nonsense. Mephis had snapped at Kana because she was in a bad mood. She was using post hoc rationalization to dress herself up in logical armor in an attempt to make it so Kumi-Kumi couldn’t complain. However, if Kumi-Kumi tried to point that out, then Mephis would really lose it. Bring up the color of her underwear, and she’d definitely snap.

With a snort, Mephis took off her glasses and held them in one hand, wiping them with a small cloth. It seemed they’d gotten clouded up from her effusing.

Adelheid and Lillian appeared to want to leave the conversation to Mephis and Kumi-Kumi. Though they clearly heard it all, they stayed out of it, chatting about the baseball game that had aired the day before. They knew just as well that nothing good came of making Mephis mad. As long as she wasn’t angry, she wasn’t a bad person, and there were things about her you could respect, like guts and competitive spirit. Mephis wasn’t the only one here with personality issues, so you had to be generous, like, *“She’s one of us, so what can you do?”*

Apparently done saying her piece, Mephis started an arrogant and know-it-all explanation about the number-four batter who’d struck out when he’d had the chance to turn the game around. Lillian barely understood the rules of baseball, and Mephis didn’t know the rules at all, but Adelheid had gotten into watching pro baseball through video games, so they’d started watching along with her. Mephis was capable of being cooperative with things like that, but then she’d never listen when people tried to scold her or tell her off. Was there some kind of trick to telling her things, or what?

They cleaned up once they finished eating, and after brushing their teeth, they were on break. But it wasn’t like they could freely

go to the sports field, library, or the computer room where the PCs were. All of those were in the new school building, so they were out of their reach, since the magical girls were forbidden from leaving the old school building. The one place they were allowed—the gym in the old school building—they could only use three times a week: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, during gym glass. It was Monday, so it was blocked off with a chain and lock. They weren't allowed to go into the courtyard, and the door to the roof was generally locked. Ever since that fight that had broken out from playing a three of spades on a joker, the cards, which were one of their few pleasures, had been confiscated, and games like shogi and *Reversi* had been banned just in case, too. There was nowhere the girls could go for fun.

They could talk in the classroom or in the hallway, and that was it. Kumi-Kumi was no good at idle chitchat. When she said as much, Adelheid had laughed, saying, "Is there such a thing as bein' good or bad at chattin'?" But that was just bragging from someone who wasn't bad at it. Still, it wasn't like she wanted to be alone, so she wound up going silent and listening to the others of her group talk.

They chatted about what was happening in a gag manga serialized online, which from there turned to the subject of a great manga in short-run serialization that had unfortunately been canceled, and Kumi-Kumi left, saying, "Bathroom." None of Group Two were in the middle school–esque habit of going to the bathroom together.

"Kumi-Kumi."

The moment Kumi-Kumi left the classroom, someone called out to her, and she jerked her head over to see Kana, who had dashed out of the room earlier.

Kumi-Kumi furrowed her brow, drew in a big breath, relaxed her face, and turned to face Kana. Though she really had been thinking she wouldn't interrogate her, the first thing that came out of her mouth was questioning her behavior. "Where…um, where were you?"

"I went to check out the new school building," Kana said without any diffidence, but also not proudly, like a delinquent who'd broken the rules. She said it dispassionately, like she was stating the facts, which made Kumi-Kumi suspicious. Even if she hadn't been listening to the rules, she had to understand just from

looking that nobody else was going into or out of the new school building.

"Entrance to the new school building is…generally… forbidden."

"Oh, really? I didn't know."

"I want you to…check the rules, one more time… No, more than once more might be good… Just check them. Ummm, at the very least…ah, the members of Group Two have to stick to the rules. A member of the group doing something…careless would cause trouble for the group as a whole—" After getting this far, Mephis's face rose in Kumi-Kumi's mind, and she swallowed what she was going to say next. The leader of Group Two herself broke the rules, so telling Kana only she should stick to them was a double standard. These thoughts cut her words short.

But Kana didn't seem bothered, bowing her head. "I see. Pardon me." Her shining silver hair swept downward in a gentle flow, then swished back the other way along with the motion of her head.

No matter how you looked at it, she was a magical girl.

She would not undo her transformation. She went out to the new school building. She ignored the rules and wasn't ashamed of it in the least. And she'd come out of a prison, too. This was too unconventional for a mere elite. She was out of the ordinary—extreme, rather. Was she consciously trying to draw attention to herself, or was she just such a big idiot that she didn't realize what she was doing? Someone with enough power to recommend her to the school had sent her over, so there was no way she could be a big idiot, but each individual action she took looked like nothing other than absolute idiocy.

Whether she was aware what Kumi-Kumi was thinking or not, Kana put a finger to her chin, took a step to the right, and looked into the classroom over Kumi-Kumi's shoulder. "On my way here, I saw Group Three talking in the hallway."

"…Oh yeah?"

"And Group Two is in the classroom? It seems that groups stick to their own during break times as well."

"That's right." Ever since the *Millionaire* incident, Mephis had avoided Group One as much as possible, and it seemed like Group One was keeping their distance from Mephis, too. And Group Three had preferred to associate among themselves to begin with.

"If there's a rule that says we stay with our group even during

breaks, I'd like you to tell me."

Kumi-Kumi's right eyebrow raised a tick. Between being an ex-con, the way she wore her uniform, being the only one who stayed transformed, and how she'd refused to chat and just scarfed down her food, Kumi-Kumi had thought her a lawless character with no intention of making friends or sticking to the rules, but it seemed Kana was actually concerned about this.

She revised her evaluation, thinking this girl might actually be better than Mephis. "There isn't, um, actually…a, you know… rule…that you can't hang out…with other groups. But how should I put it…? There is, probably…something like a…tacit understanding. Well…since, before, um, like…there was…stuff." Of course she couldn't say, *"It's because our group leader was about to lose at cards and got violent, so things got awkward."* It was better to speak vaguely than to spread around her group's shame.

Whatever Kana thought of this, she folded her arms and nodded. "I see. So you mean there's some situation you can't talk about?"

"Well, um…yeah. I can't deny that."

"And who's most informed on this matter you can't speak of?"

Someone from Group Two talking about the situation would only be advertising their own embarrassment. And if Kana brought up the subject with Group One and they found out Kumi-Kumi was the one who'd told her, that would make it look like she was insinuating something by sending Kana to them, and she could anticipate that would mess up the relationship between Groups One and Two even worse.

So then, Calkoro. She was the only one who'd know exactly why she'd made the decision and what her standard for judgment was, and she seemed like the best choice for someone they knew.

Kumi-Kumi was about to say, *"You should get the teacher to tell you,"* but then she reconsidered. Nothing good would come of it if she said, *"I think the teacher would know,"* and turned the problem over to her, and then the teacher thought Kumi-Kumi was using the newbie in Group Two to try to pull something. She could even imagine a worst-case situation where her graduation was put at risk. And Group Two already had poor evaluations to begin with.

By the time Kumi-Kumi thought to tell her, *"You shouldn't probe into that sort of thing,"* Kana was already gone. Remembering that Kana's magic was to let her know the answer to questions, Kumi-

Kumi let out the umpteenth sigh of the day. This had all been nothing but hassle. Regardless, she walked to the bathroom.

◇ Calkoro

Kana quickly finished her school lunch and ran off. Calkoro had no idea what she planned to do or where she was going. She doubted that free spirit would report to her honestly about it, either.

But still, figuring that she had to report to Halna, Calkoro quickly bolted down her rice, laid down her chopsticks, and placed her plate and tray on the long table for school lunches. Calkoro had been trying to eat quickly, but most of the kids had already finished their meals. The only ones still eating were Arlie and Dory, who were poking each other in the sides with their fingers while the others all chatted.

The kids were all so carefree. It even made her envious. Calkoro had such a mountain of things to do. Before her melancholy reached her legs and kept her from moving, she quickly left the classroom. As she walked, she shaped her fingers in seals and muttered some spells. First, she made the inside of her mouth clean, and then she cast a spell for strengthening her digestive organs to help digestion and absorption. By doing this, even if she walked quickly after eating, she wouldn't be tormented by stomachaches.

"Ms. Calkoro."

Right as she was about to speed up, a voice called her to a stop, and she turned around. Her face automatically took on a beleaguered look. But she couldn't be like that, even with this particular student. After a breath's pause, Calkoro forced some dignity to her face befitting a teacher as she smiled and replied, "What is it?"

It was Kana. The tatters here and there on her uniform seemed to suit her, for some reason. The sort of damage that would normally come off as poor and dingy looked wild and sexy on her, achieving a perfect balance that increased rather than hurt her charm. Calkoro got the feeling that something about her couldn't just be chalked up to her being a magical girl, but she couldn't express that "something" in words.

Kana took three steps toward Calkoro. She was close enough that Calkoro could feel her breath. She clenched her sweaty palms.

Her anxiety increased.

Calkoro had no idea what Kana was thinking. She was quite literally a criminal, and she wasn't trying to hide that she was inspecting and exploring the school.

"There's something I want you to tell me," said Kana. She let out a sigh that stroked Calkoro from her jaw to her throat. Even that one exhalation was so captivating.

"What is it?" Calkoro asked.

"I heard there's a reason they can't tell me for why all the groups stick to themselves for everything."

Kana did away with any kind of reservation or consideration. Her question absolutely abandoned any of the social techniques of the aristocratic classes, who hid their goals in their breast to sidle up with a smile—her question was like raising a naked blade over her head to charge forward. Calkoro reflexively made to back away, but Kana matched her with a step forward, bringing them closer instead. Not only did Calkoro feel her breath, even their skin was touching now.

Calkoro looked away. "Who told you that?"

"I heard you know a lot about situations you can't say out loud."

She missed her moment to attempt to deny it. She thought she had to say something, but her voice wouldn't come out. Kana gently touched Calkoro's arm with her right hand. Despite thinking privately, *Does she have no sense of personal space?* her voice still wouldn't come out.

"A situation people can't say out loud…" The issue of the factions rose to mind. This school was effectively an extension of factional conflict. The groups had been divided along factional lines to avoid quarrels as much as possible.

But Calkoro could never tell a student that—and definitely not this dubious magical girl. "Of course…I…can't tell you… That's not information I should be revealing to a student," she somehow wrung out, though faltering.

Calkoro's denial did not change Kana's expression at all. Twisting her body around, Kana leaned her face in persistently close to her from below.

Sweat streaked down Calkoro's forehead, stopping at her eyebrows. Her back was drenched, making her shirt stick to her skin, while the sweating from her underarms caught in the band of

her bra, oozing into it.

"I want to know," said Kana. "I don't want to use my magic, if possible. I was careless before and wound up using my magic by accident, but I want to avoid using it."

"I…I won't say… You shouldn't know that information."

"In other words, you can't tell me, but you know?"

"Well…"

"Now then, who is it?" Kana narrowed her eyes with a little nod. That slight gesture made her hair swish forward, stroking Calkoro's robe.

Calkoro audibly swallowed. "Hey…"

"I understand. Where is the principal now?" Before she could hear Calkoro's answer, Kana's expression clouded. "Pardon me. I understand that I shouldn't ask, but it just pops out of my mouth."

Like a snake that had been wrapped around every inch of her body leaving its prey, Kana slithered away, straightening her fingers to place both hands at her thighs and bow her head. "Thank you. I'm grateful."

Before Calkoro could even voice her surprise, the girl was gone.

Calkoro drew in a big breath, then blew it out, leaning her hands on her knees to support herself as she looked around. There was nobody in the area. It didn't seem like she was being watched. What a disgraceful sight. It was difficult to express just what was disgraceful and how, but nevertheless, she understood that this was unquestionably a disgrace.

Her whole body was drenched with sweat. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She understood that she needed time to regain the presence of mind to think about things. So then there was only one thing to do.

Calkoro transformed, taking her magical-girl form. The sensation of cloth sticking to skin went away, and her heartbeat regained its calm. She let out a deep breath and inhaled a long one, then put her fingers to her glasses to adjust their position.

Once she'd regained her composure, she could start thinking. Just what the heck had that been? Being face-to-face with a magical girl while not transformed would make anyone anxious. And those various other conditions—being close enough to touch skin or Kana being fresh out of prison, and even not counting that, the fact that they had no idea what she really was—all would have increased her anxiety. But was that really all it was?

Removing her fingers from the temples of her glasses to press the pads of her fingers against the abacus at her side, she flicked a bead.

Calkoro's magic was "an abacus that confers great calculating abilities," but she wasn't about to try calculating that earlier situation. At times when she was trying to compose herself, to settle her heart like a calm at sea, her hands would naturally reach out to her abacus. And it did work. Now that she'd cooled her head a little, she concluded that this was strange, after all.

It had never happened to her before. That girl held a fierce presence. That hadn't been a danger to Calkoro's person that she could express in words like *"I thought I was going to die,"* or even if she didn't go that far, that she had felt a clear sense of hostility. There had been *something big* that she had never felt before. Kana's presence alone had made her feel overwhelmed.

Calkoro had absolutely no clue as to what this thing she'd never felt before was. It wasn't Kana's magic. It was also different from her strength as a magical girl. So then what was it? The answer was not forthcoming. And Calkoro didn't know why. And the conclusion that she didn't know wouldn't get her anywhere.

Hearing the sound of a door opening from behind her, she turned around. Kumi-Kumi, who'd just come out of the bathroom, was looking confused—or rather, suspicious. "Ms. Calkoro…did something happen?"

Remembering that *oh yeah*, she was transformed, Calkoro brought the hand that had been on her abacus to her mouth, and with a weighty cough in an attempt to put even a little dignity in it, she muttered, "It's nothing," as if she were telling that to herself, following up with, "You don't have to worry about it."

Kumi-Kumi was a student who would listen to what teachers said. Her expression dissolved, and she bowed and returned to the classroom.

I have to go to the principal's office right away, Calkoro thought, but if she went in as a magical girl, then Halna would demand why she was transformed. But if she detransformed, then she'd be covered in sweat. She needed a change of clothes and a shower. After she did that, she'd head to the principal's office. She decided her excuse for being late would be that "Kana was walking too fast."

◇ Halna Midi Meren

As the one responsible for the management of the magical-girl class, Halna was ultimately no more than a manager, and she did not have the official title of “principal.” Though they did declare externally that they were an official operation, she only maintained and managed one class, and she had not been officially appointed to the position of school principal.

But nevertheless, because she was in charge, people called Halna the principal, and she didn’t bother to correct them. She more or less comported herself as if she were the principal, though she was not. And so there was no plate up in front of the room that had been arranged for her that read PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE, because it was not a room where the principal was.

Calling it just an “office” would be fair, but that wasn’t the sort of thing you would bother putting up a plaque to indicate. Compared to her role at the Information Bureau, the responsibility and volume of labor involved were so trifling it would fly away if you blew on it, and Halna was absent far more often than not. The majority of the students only thought of it as *Some weird room; I don’t really know what it is*.

A major point of the room was its role as a reception area, so it was properly furnished to look like a principal’s office, so as not to be a disgrace to outsiders. The carpet was extremely plush, to the point that your feet sank in it, which made it hard to walk. The silver candlesticks and beeswax candles weren’t a proper source of light. This was also the only place in the old school building that had been designed to hide the fire alarm and sprinklers from view. This sort of vacantly ostentatious authoritarian style was far from Halna’s own taste, but considering she didn’t use this room on a regular basis, it wasn’t like she couldn’t put up with it.

The design of the space had been done by the Puk Faction. Even if she wanted to complain, they had already been kicked out. It would be ingratitude to complain to them now, after so graciously making this facility and system for raising excellent magical girls, then offering the pretext for it to be seized from them.

As Halna’s pen was scrawling along under just the right level of brightness, there came a knock on the door. Looking up, Halna turned to the entrance. No motion of the black, thick-looking wooden door followed the sound. The person on the other side was

waiting for Halna's permission.

Some mages deemed it shameful to behave in different ways to different people. Halna, however, did not share that view. That was nothing more than the complaint of someone who couldn't adapt to the needs of the moment, grumbling *"I don't quite like changing your attitude depending on the person"* like an excuse.

In a tone of restrained inflection, neither gentle enough that she would be disrespected by those below her, nor cold enough that she would be loathed by those she didn't want to hate her, she said, "Come in," prompting the visitor to enter.

The one to come into the room was the new transfer student. Halna regretted having bothered worrying about her inflection and clicked her tongue before saying, "What do you want?"

"Your clothes are different from when we met this morning," replied Kana. "They look easier to move in."

"Formal robes make my shoulders stiff. They're not suited to desk work. They make me less efficient. So what about that? If you've come to chat about something so trivial…"

"I have a question for you."

"I have no desire to tell a criminal anything."

"A prisoner and a criminal are two different things."

"If you came here just to come up with such quibbling self-justification—"

"I'm not. There's something I want you to tell me."

People who rise to important stations young enough to be called exceptional will be tailed by prejudice and bias. When dealing with people of such despicable character, first, Halna would glare at them. For Halna, this was enough to resolve most issues.

However, this was not an effective method of resolution with this magical girl called Kana. She didn't flinch under the look that people whispered was the glare of the Gorgon. Since her reaction indicated no pleasure or displeasure at all, it was even possible she didn't understand what Halna meant by it.

The tension in Halna's brow eased. Glaring at Kana would just add more pointless wrinkles. "…What is it you wanted to hear from me? Tell me."

"I'm told there's some unspoken reason for why the students will stick with their own groups, even during break times. I want to know why that is and why people won't say."

The factions of their sponsors, eh?

Halna immediately got it. But still, she couldn't get what Kana meant by this.

She looked back at Kana's face, but there was no information to be read off it. Not knowing what she was thinking had remained consistent from the time they'd met earlier that day. But the question as to whether she could come to like this magical girl was something else, and it was in fact fair to say that this was pushing in the negative direction.

Swallowing the invective that nearly leaped out of her, Halna examined Kana again. She wore a cool expression. It seemed the issue was not about her being gutsy or unable to read the atmosphere. The thought crossed Halna's mind that perhaps it was doing this sort of thing repeatedly that had gotten her imprisoned.

"Why do you need to know that?" Halna asked.

"My memories got sealed away."

"I've already been informed."

"But not completely. I can talk, and I can think. It seems like I have a certain degree of knowledge, too. I can only ever remember things right when I think of them, but I believe I was more knowledgeable than I imagined," Kana said, taking a step forward, avoiding the desk to attempt to circle around from the side.

Halna rose from her chair and kept her in place, saying, "Stop right there." Not loudly, but sharply. "Why are you approaching me?"

"Someone once said that contact between student and teacher is important."

"Don't try to act smart, *prisoner*. Come any closer, and I'll deem it an attack."

"Don't take it the wrong way. I considered what I should do to be on better terms and then took action. I have no ill will." Expression serious, both hands raised, Kana returned to her original position. "In other words, that's what this is about, Halna…Ms. Halna. What should I do to become friends?"

"I don't understand your point."

"I want to befriend my classmates, but it's no good for just one person to be unaware of a tacit understanding, isn't it? I'm like an outsider. If I could know what it is, then I won't be out of place in the class anymore. Or at least, there would be one less reason for me to be out of place."

Halna stared intently at Kana's face. The girl was overly serious.

She didn't seem to be fooling around. She also didn't look as if she'd lost her mind. If she was speaking in earnest, Halna would be forced to doubt her sanity, but still, Halna figured out what her intentions were.

"In other words, you want to know what your classmates' tacit understanding is, so you can be friends with them?" Halna said, punctuating each of her words as she mentally confirmed the information.

"That's right," Kana agreed readily. Her silver hair swished at the same moment the candlewick sizzled.

Halna still believed Kana was an infiltrator sent by the Caspar Faction. It wasn't just in show business where the will of the sponsor was the most important thing for a magical girl—it was very much plausible that infiltrators would be wearing the masks of good magical girls to attend the school. But what about Kana? Was her mask managing to hide her goal? Her position as a prisoner would inevitably make her stick out like a sore thumb. And since coming to this school, she hadn't even tried to hide that she was investigating things. She was far too crude an infiltrator.

Being the deputy chief of the Information Bureau, Halna knew quite a lot of things. Somehow or other, a magical girl named Pythie Frederica had curried favor with Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami to take control of the Caspar Faction. Even given that the Caspar Faction was lacking in both drive and ability, it was extraordinary to dominate it in such a short period of time. This Frederica she'd been hearing about was pretty sharp.

And if that was the one who had gone so far as to pull Kana out of prison for her ends, then was it possible for Kana to be merely a fool? Kana's preincarceration records as well as her crimes had been entirely covered up. Halna had assumed this was inevitable, given the nature of the prison institution, but should she really be leaving it at that? Kana's attempts at investigation were too blatant.

This didn't fit right. There was an imbalance. Something was off.

Actually, though…perhaps I should see how she behaves now and make use of her.

"All right." Striking her thigh, Halna plucked the notepad off her desk and tore off a page. Scribbling over the memo paper with her pen, she moved her fingers along with an incantation and cast a spell.

Kana tilted her head. “I’ve seen that technique before. A contract?”

Halna drew her chin back slightly. Kana wasn’t wrong. It was a very simple contract spell. It was used on those whose abilities as a mage were less than yourself and was often used by higher mages when binding their subordinates. Its use was limited, but that made it not consume much power, and it was easy to cast.

That Kana was able to guess at that from the incantation and seals meant that she had received education as a mage or that she was a magical girl who had associated with mages. Whichever it was, that was important information, but Halna couldn’t see any point to Kana having told her about it. Was Kana just trying to confuse her, or was this some sort of ploy? Or was she really nothing more than a fool?

“Don’t tell anyone what you have learned here,” Halna warned, “or who it was who informed you.”

“Understood. Then we have an agreement.”

“The groups in your class are divided based on which faction their backers are associated with. Magical girls from other factions are no more than competition, and when you include the risk of information leaks and other factors, there’s no need for them to be chummy.”

“I see, so that’s why.”

Halna laid the twice-folded paper on top of the desk and flicked it over to Kana. Right before it slid off the edge, the magical girl’s graceful fingers snatched it up from the side, deftly spreading it open with one hand. It described how Group One was the Osk Faction, Group Two was the Caspar Faction, and Group Three was a mishmash of other nobles and the Puk Faction.

Kana’s gaze went back and forth over the page twice, and then she flicked the paper back the other way. The twice-folded paper stopped halfway across the desk, in a position you couldn’t say was close to either of them. “I’ve memorized it. Throw it away.”

Halna crushed the memo paper in her hand, then tossed it into the trash bin on the floor. With an expression that would be viewed as serious, objectively speaking, she turned back to Kana. “Are we done?”

“Basically.”

“Then get out. Students shouldn’t linger around here.”

Kana took a step back, fingers of both hands pressed over her

thighs as she bowed. “Thank you,” she said, and with a “Then pardon me,” there was the sound of the door closing, and she was gone.

Halna put her elbows on the table, supporting her chin with her hands. Even if she still didn’t know what Kana was scheming, if she could figure out that she did seem to be scheming something, then she should call things fine for now. If Kana continued acting so brazen, Halna would quickly discover her goal. And if Kana were to operate so as to keep only her goal from being known, then Halna would be able to manage that somewhat, too.

Whatever the Caspar Faction was after, this was the Information Bureau’s territory. And most of all, this facility for magical-girl education could be called Halna’s long-standing ambition. She had no reason to let Kana run rampant here.

Halna massaged her right upper arm a bit, then brought her hand to her shoulder and rubbed there. Stress had made her stiff. You couldn’t have even called that just now “sounding each other out.” She hadn’t sensed any hostile intent. Halna was accustomed to dealing with magical girls, given her position, but she’d tensed up anyway. She relaxed her left upper arm and shoulder in turn, then massaged her long ears.

It seemed this magical girl was of a caliber that she could exert pressure on the deputy chief of the Information Bureau—a position that couldn’t be managed without resistance to stress. Even if this girl appeared to be nothing other than a fool, if Halna took her at face value, she would surely be the one treated like a fool.

◇ Tetty Goodgripp

Once you’re in middle school, you have to be careful what you bring up in casual conversation. If you brought up the topic *“What did you think of yesterday’s* Cutie Healer *episode?”* you’d obviously get laughed at. *“You’re watching Sunday-morning anime, even in middle school?”* they’d say, or *“Ohhh, so you’re one of* those otaku.*”*

In that regard, the magical-girl class was great. People wouldn’t laugh at you or call you childish or immature for watching magical-girl anime, from *Cutie Healer* on down. They wouldn’t treat you like a creepy *otaku* for getting excited about transformation scenes or new members of the team. You might even be commended for

being aspirational, passionate about research.

On Monday at lunch, Group One was excitedly chatting about the *Cutie Healer* episode that had broadcast the other day. Miss Ril brought up something the heroine's mother had done, which seemed like foreshadowing, while Rappy talked about what a great idea it was to make the mascot transform into a cute boy. Arlie and Dory made interjections in broken Japanese, while occasionally having some kind of exchange in chirp-like words that seemed to be their mother tongue, occasionally even developing into fights, and when that happened, the other three pacified them, pulled them apart, or cut between them.

At some point, Dory smoothed the front of her skirt and hopped around, and figuring out that she wanted to go to the bathroom, Tetty prompted, "Let's go together," and with a "Then I'll come, too," the rest of them all headed out to the washroom. Some did their business, others waited as they continued their chat, others turned to the mirror and adjusted their hair, and once they were all done, with an "Okay, let's go back," they all shuffled off again.

Coming into the hallway, they didn't go far before Tetty came to a stop. Someone was waiting for them. In an imposing stance, hands on hips, the magical girl somehow pulled off the torn uniform she wore as if it were meant to be that way.

Kana had only just had that spat with Mephis. Tetty had thought they'd make up during lunch, but apparently not. Tetty had been sympathetic to the other members of Kana's group, thinking it would be hard to manage with the newcomer, but she'd never thought Kana would start trouble with Tetty's group as well, and she couldn't hide her bewilderment.

Miss Ril smiled like she didn't know what to do. Arlie and Dory ignored everyone else, coming forward, until Rappy grabbed them by their collars to stop them.

Tetty was confused but stepped out in front of the rest of her group. "…Yes?"

"It seems I have a bit of information about the Information Bureau," said Kana.

"Pardon?"

"The chief's name is…yes, I think it was Alg Ve Lenz."

Kana was looking at Tetty. In other words, she was speaking to Tetty. But Tetty had no clue what she was trying to say. Alg-whatever just sounded like a string of incomprehensible foreign

words, and she didn't know anything about the Information Bureau or its chief, either.

Praying, *Please don't take this the wrong way*, she put on a polite smile and tilted her head. "Sorry. I kind of don't know what you're talking about or what you mean."

Kana narrowed her eyes, put her hand to her chin, considered a few moments, and eventually nodded. "I see. No member of the Information Bureau would admit to their own membership, eh."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I should have taken the nature of the Information Bureau into consideration. I really haven't been thinking enough. This has to be another side effect of my memories being taken from me. But I do remember the odd thing, surprisingly." Kana drew her eyes away from Tetty and next turned to Miss Ril. "The chief of the Management Department is Ragi Zwe Nento. I don't believe I'm wrong on this. He's a narrow-minded old man who hates magical girls, but if he's become involved in an educational facility for them, it seems he's had a change of heart."

Miss Ril tilted her head, an uncomfortable expression on her face. The angle of her tilt was a little shallower than Tetty's. "Ummm…Management…Department? There's such a place?"

Kana's eyes widened, and she covered her face with her right hand, mussing around her hair. "The Magical Girl Management Department recommended your entry into this magical-girl class. In other words, you couldn't not be acquainted with Ragi Zwe Nento."

"Ohhh, that's what you meant," said Miss Ril. "I'm sorry. I don't know anything about who recommended me. I think maybe I should thank them, but I've never had the opportunity to find out who it was."

Rappy, who'd just been restraining Dory and Arlie, went "Ohhh!" and raised her hand. "I know, I know! That old man called Ragi-something-or-other! He's the head honcho from the Magical Girl Management Department!"

Expression still serious, Kana tilted her head. *It's nothing but tilting heads here*, Tetty thought.

"Why do you know Ragi Zwe Nento, Rappy?" Kana asked. "Wasn't your recommendation from the Magical Girl Resources Department? You have nothing to do with Ragi Zwe Nento from Management."

"No, it's nothing like that! A while back, there was this kinda

fad for doing extreme info theft from the Management Department! It was like a challenge thing, and people would sneak through the super-high-level department security to try to snatch random unimportant info! And a magical girl named Snow White pulled it off! And then she got famous! And a lot of girls tried to pull it off, just like her! I never did it, though. Oh, for real, seriously, I haven't done anything I'd get in trouble for if it got brought up, okay? I just knew 'cause it was going around."

Kana didn't listen to Rappy all the way to the end, turning to Dory instead. "Regarding the lab…I don't really remember. I apologize."

"No apologiiize."

Next, Kana turned to Arlie. "As for the Inspection Department… I believe I should have some sort of memories of it from when I was arrested, but since my memories were deleted, I can't remember. I apologize."

Arlie shook her head. She was making those words like chirping, but Tetty didn't know what they meant. Like Dory, she had to be saying something like, *"Don't worry about it."*

Miss Ril's tilted head went back to its original angle, and her cheeks trembled. "Kana…um, what is this about?"

"I've managed to find out which places recommended my classmates. I can't tell you the source of the information."

"Okay."

"So then I thought if I could bring up the subject of those sponsors and get the conversation going, I might be able to make friends."

"Okay…I don't know about that." Not sure about what she should say, Tetty gave Rappy a sidelong glance.

Rappy looked up at the ceiling for a while, then nodded *right*, before laughing. "You don't need that to make friends!" and Miss Ril added, "Let's be friends," taking Kana's hand in a firm clasp, and Arlie and Dory chittered, clapping Kana on the shoulder and back.

Tetty still didn't really get what was going on, but she felt like she had to go along with everyone else, and so she put an arm around Kana's shoulders and said, "Yes, let's be friends," patting her back. The words were empty, going with the flow without understanding anything, but Kana still said "Thank you" with a serious expression, bowing as she followed with, "I'm glad to be friends," and that just made Tetty feel bad instead.

Wondering what in the heck she was doing, Tetty smiled, Miss Ril expressed joy, Rappy showed excitement, and Arlie and Dory skipped all around.

CHAPTER 4
SCHOOL IN COMBAT

◇ **Kana**

The plans for the class had been changed.

"We're having rec time in the gymnasium," announced the magical girl with the large abacus who stood at the front of the class.

The devil-style magical girl with hair ends sharp like tails thrust a fist in the air with a cheer, while the armor and drill pair both shrieked with glee. The others seemed glad, too, even if they weren't as obvious about it.

The magical girl with the abacus was Calkoro, the demon was Mephis, the armored girl was Arlie, and the girl with the drill was Dory. Kana mentally matched names and appearances, making sure she didn't have it wrong. Then she went for a certain pickax bedaubed with accessories and stickers, approaching the magical girl who was just standing there and not looking happy about this.

Standing diagonally behind that girl, Kana called out, "Kumi-Kumi. About the rec time."

Kumi-Kumi must not have been ready to be spoken to, as Kana caught a flinch in the way she twisted around to look at her. Kumi-Kumi immediately corrected her posture to face Kana, and after a look over at the other excited girls, she started talking. "It's…sort of like gym class."

"But they seem happy about it."

"Compared to the running, marathons, or gym-class gymnastics, it's more like a game or competition… Yeah, it's almost like playtime."

"If this is like a class, then doing well will be reflected in our assessments, right?"

“Do you…need to score well?”

“I don’t have a pencil, so I was forced to submit a blank paper for that earlier assignment,” Kana explained. “I’m sure I won’t be graded well for that, so that means I have to do better elsewhere to balance it out.”

Kumi-Kumi’s eyes narrowed slightly, then after a moment, she shook her head. “If you’d told me…I’d have lent you one.”

“Unlike a textbook, one pencil can’t be shared between two people.”

“I have…more than two.”

“Oh, really?”

“Next time…I’ll lend you one.”

It seemed less that Kumi-Kumi faltered as she spoke and more like she took time choosing her words. If she made an effort to choose the most accurate language, it was fair to say they were just that sincere.

“But she’s still not group leader,” Kana mused.

“Who…?”

“Pardon me, thinking aloud. Do we have these rec times often?”

Kumi-Kumi considered awhile, eyes looking somewhere far in the distance, then drew her jaw back in a nod. “Not really… There’s been, um, three times in April, and this is…the first in May.” Her hat, with its metallic sheen, shifted back and forth as her head moved, exposing a bit more of her forehead. “Unlike gym class…we do it with everyone transformed.”

“Oh-ho.”

“The groups…compete with one another.”

“Oh-ho-ho. So then you and I are on the same team.”

Kumi-Kumi seemed about to say something but then didn’t, falling silent with a nod. Lots of magical girls acted so completely different when transformed, you’d think they were different people, but Kumi-Kumi’s tendency to be taciturn hadn’t changed.

“Perhaps that’s just the quality appropriate for a subleader,” Kana said.

“Hey…what is?”

“Pardon me. Don’t worry about it.”

Kumi-Kumi did seem to still be curious, but she apparently assumed Kana wasn’t going to talk about it any further and instead went to warn Mephis, who had laid her hand on the military-styled Adelheid’s shoulder. “Careful not to get carried away,” she warned,

while Mephis showed her irritation. But Kana thought that diligently advising the team leader, even if she didn't like it, was how a subleader should be—though this time, she didn't say so aloud.

Following Calkoro, the magical girls all walked down the hall, heading for the gym. But they were not marching in orderly lines like you might think. They all kept to little clumps, conversing among their own as they walked.

"Baaall!"

"When you transform, you don't have to clean off your makeup; it's so easy! Ha-haaa!" Rappy squealed.

"Wasn't there supposed to be a school rule that makeup isn't allowed…?" Tetty wondered.

"This school is pretty lax on that sort of thing," said Miss Ril.

"I'm glad it is! Seriously!"

"Makeuuup!"

Group One all acted the same in human form, chatting in a carefree manner—Tetty, with her big mittens and characteristic waitress style; Miss Ril, looking like nothing other than a metal statue of a lady; Rappy, with a very revealing costume that used a lot of transparent material; Dory, with her giant drill on her shoulder; and Arlie in heavy armor. They all showed many things in common with how they were as ordinary girls. Miss Ril's expression was static and unblinking, while the different thing about Arlie was that she didn't talk when transformed, showing what she meant with body language only, but Miss Ril's tone was still soft, and Arlie's gestures were still silly.

"I'll kick all their asses," Mephis announced. Kumi-Kumi immediately chided her.

"Mephis… Don't go too far…"

"Ah think it's swell she's rarin' to go."

"Let's do our best while not getting hurt," Classical Lillian said.

Group Two, on the other hand, had the aggressive Mephis in devil style; Kumi-Kumi, who had chided her, with her big pickax; and Adelheid in her military style being conciliatory. All of them were about the same as when in human form, but Classical Lillian had completely transformed. Before, she'd been timid, always glancing around at others to see what they thought. But now, her aloof attitude and faintly statuesque smile wafted a powerful ego and confidence. Someone who seemed like she'd cling to religion

had turned into someone who seemed she'd start a religion. Many would gain confidence from the power of being a magical girl, so maybe that was how it was for her.

"Mephis is lookin' over this way… Is she tryin' to provoke us or what?" asked Ranyi.

"Fights with her aren't cheap, yeahhh. It's not worth it," said Sally Raven.

"I'll leave it up to you whether we take her up on that, Diko," said Princess Lightning.

And then there was Group Three. Three of them—Ranyi, who looked sort of like a goldfish; Sally Raven, with her crow motif; and Princess Lightning, with drums on her back like a certain Japanese deity—acted and talked the same. Pshuke Prains, who carried a water gun, wore a dark expression as she muttered curses. Couldn't see any changes there, either. Diko Narakunoin's hood hid most of her face so that only her mouth was visible, but she was smiling like she was enjoying herself. She wasn't very expressive in human form, but it seemed she could at least show she was having fun with a smile as a magical girl. But the fact that she didn't talk much hadn't changed.

Satisfied that she had grasped all their names both when transformed and not, Kana nodded as she walked. It seemed that many of them had some changes of varying degrees, but since the groups always stuck together, it shouldn't be an obstacle on a day-to-day basis.

When she started thinking about how the groups stuck together, suddenly, Kana noticed her own position. Aside from Calkoro, who was walking in front, her classmates were all with their groups. Kana had been so absorbed in observing the other girls, she'd forgotten she was the only one walking away from the others. Whatever she was going to be doing, she had to work with the others, or it might hinder her experience. Getting along with everyone also meant keeping in step with everyone else.

Kana sped up to move from the tail end of the class, passing Group One to follow Group Two.

The tail that came out from under the hair at the back of Mephis's head twitched, and she turned back. Eyebrows crinkling, she looked at Kana. "Hey, transfer student. Don't drag us down."

"That's an interesting place to have a tail," Kana said.

"You listening to me?"

Adelheid slid in between them with a “C’mon now” as she clapped Mephis on the shoulder. “This ain’t something ya gotta be so fussed about winnin’.”

“I don’t wanna lose and have others looking down their nose at me,” Mephis snorted.

Lillian smiled broadly as if she hadn’t even seen that reaction. “No matter what the motive, tackling a competition wholeheartedly is a noble stance.”

It’s not just her face—she even sounds religious, Kana felt but did not say. Wondering what Mephis would say, she glanced over to see the group leader expressing no particular thoughts on the matter, glaring over at Group Three instead.

Seeing Mephis getting in a huff, Kumi-Kumi said to her quietly, “Mephis. Please…don’t break the rules.”

“I know! You don’t have to repeat yourself every time, okay.”

“Sticking to the rules makes it so we can all enjoy the game.”

Lillian really did sound gentle. Mephis was so belligerent, wouldn’t peacemaking remarks like that aggravate her? Kana looked over at Mephis, but she didn’t even touch on what Lillian had said, opening her mouth to say, “If they break the rules, then we can—” But before she could finish, all three of them stopped her.

“…Absolutely not.”

“No way.”

“Let’s not.”

Kana felt like the group’s method of internal regulation was working, and Mephis not arguing with Lillian was a part of that. Their activity as a group was the priority, so competitive events against other groups weren’t the time for internal conflict. From how Kana saw it as an outsider, their other classmates seemed to get along among their own groups, too. Would Kana eventually fit in with Group Two as well and be able to engage with them smoothly? She just couldn’t imagine herself like that but decided to keep in mind that it wasn’t a bad idea to make that a goal for now.

Meanwhile, they arrived at the gymnasium. Calkoro rattled the thick metal lock, and the large doors slid away to either side. Kana had been told that this was a place for cultivating the body, but she had no memory of the phrase.

The walls and floor were both wood paneled. There were exposed girders on the ceiling. You could fit about four classrooms

in the space, which was a little small for magical girls to be running around. There were baskets of white balls marked with winding grooves and orange balls covered in fine protrusions. Rings with attached nets that seemed to be to put balls into were attached to boards supported by metal poles on the walls, while large patterns were drawn on the floor.

Kana squatted down, putting her hands on the floor to stroke the patterns. They were not familiar to her. “Are these newly developed inscription techniques?”

“Uh, what’re ya talkin’ ’bout?” Kana lifted her head to see Adelheid giving her a baffled look.

“So then what are these?” Kana asked.

“Court lines.”

“Court lines, huh? Never heard the term before.”

“Huh? Ya seriously never seen these before? Yer not waitin’ for a comeback, here? This ain’t a joke? Ya got basketball, volleyball, futsal, badminton, anythin’ and everythin’.”

Kana narrowed her eyes. She’d never heard of basketball, futsal, or badminton, but one term, *volleyball*, she did feel like she’d heard before. “Oh, beach volleyball.”

“Uh, there ain’t no beach here.”

Calkoro rattled her abacus to get everyone’s attention, ordering the students to gather. They all shuffled up, coming together in their groups to sit in front of the teacher. Kana sat down as well, behind Kumi-Kumi.

“We’ll be having a mock battle today,” said Calkoro. “It will be more like real combat than the one we had in April.”

And now, yet another event Kana had never experienced before was brought up. All the girls went quiet, then immediately burst into murmurs. It didn’t seem like a pleased reaction. In fact, they seemed confused.

“But it will be the first rec time for one of us,” Calkoro continued. A number of the girls looked at Kana, then right back at the teacher again.

“No hurting your classmates. And no damage to the equipment or gymnasium. Anyone who takes a clean hit from a homunculus is also out. If you block or stop it, you’re safe. These rules are all the same as last time. Next, as for what’s different: Last time, each group sparred with homunculi, but this time, everyone will be fighting at once in the gym. Please do your best until five minutes

have passed and I signal it's over, or until all the homunculi are destroyed. We'll add up all the homunculi defeated by each group, and the group that's defeated the most wins. Anyone who breaks the rules will leave the fighting area and go up to the stage and watch until the mock battle is over. All right, let's make sure to stick to the rules and have a good fight."

Calkoro rattled her abacus, and with that as the signal, black figures filed out from behind the curtains on the stage.

◇ Tetty Goodgripp

"I thought it was gonna be softball or something! Nooo! I never thought it'd be a mock battle!" Rappy cried.

"We can assume you'll be our point getter, Dory…," said Tetty. "Oh, just be careful to avoid hitting other groups with your attacks."

"Got it."

"I think a clear division of roles would be better than all of us just attacking the homunculi," Tetty continued. "Arlie and Miss Ril, focus on defense. Guard the homunculi, so the other groups don't take them."

"I'll do my best," said Miss Ril.

"Rappy, you'll be on offense, and I'll take the attacker role this time around, too. We really wouldn't have enough attackers if we split two to three, and we wouldn't be able to get points."

They were given time to have a meeting with their groups before starting, and so Tetty earnestly explained their roles. There was something about the decision to hold a more realistic mock battle that bothered her. Once she started thinking that maybe this wasn't just recreation but an important event that would affect their grades, she couldn't stop, and the thought lingered in her mind.

Calkoro seemed to have explained in the same perfunctory manner as always, but Tetty picked up a hint of worry in her face and the way her words came out. It also bothered Tetty that they were doing this now, when the transfer student had only just come. Kana wasn't used to things at school yet, so doing the usual things in the usual way would be easiest for her. But now they were having rec time, which was a special event, and what's more, it was mock combat. Wasn't it only natural to assume the teacher was

trying to ascertain her abilities?

Tetty casually sneaked a glance at the teacher. Calkoro looked at Group One, then Group Two, then Group Three, then Group Two, and then after checking the clock, she eyed Group Two again. She watched them more than the others. There was something suspicious about the look in her eyes. That was the look of someone trying to make an evaluation. The housewife down the street, Mrs. Kinoshita, who was a sucker for gossip and had been called the neighborhood loudspeaker, had often watched other people like that.

She is *worried about the transfer student, after all.*

Mock battles were more straightforward than team sports. You would see someone's physical capabilities very clearly and use magic very clearly. There wasn't much room to sneak in any tricks.

"Wait, it looks like our group's at a disadvantage!" cried Rappy. "This is gonna be harsh!"

"If we were playing a regular sport, Tetty could shine in just about any of them," said Miss Ril.

"It'd be nice if we could do something interesting, though! You got any good ideas, Tetty?"

With the discussion suddenly turned to her, Tetty automatically coughed and adjusted the tone of her voice before turning back to Rappy. "Why…um, are you asking me something like that?"

"You were looking at the court, so I thought you'd come up with something!"

"No, no, I really haven't… You know, I was just thinking that if we're doing realistic mock combat, that means we were getting graded on it."

"So then we've gotta do our best! Actually, I've got a bunch of ideas myself!"

"What kind of ideas?" Miss Ril asked.

"First, I use my wrap!" said Rappy. "And then like, well, lots of stuff!"

"Um, if we're going to talk about strategy, we should be a little quieter…," Tetty pointed out.

While laughing along with the others, out the corner of her eye, Tetty looked at Calkoro. She was eyeing Group Two again. Tetty shifted her gaze, capturing Group Two in her view. Mephis was talking, practically yelling. Tetty couldn't really tell if Kana was listening or not. *Things are tough for Mephis, too*, Tetty thought

sympathetically, though it wasn't her problem.

◇ **Ranyi**

"Why a mock battle now?" Ranyi wondered aloud, and Lightning and Sally both looked at her—Lightning's expression didn't change at all, while Sally's face was kind of pitying.

"I figure she's trying to check the transfer student's skills, yeahhh," said Sally. "Since it'd involve everything physical, unlike ball sports."

"Look, she's watching the transfer student again. Calkoro is very focused on her," said Lightning.

Seeing their reactions, Ranyi belatedly realized—they weren't even wondering *"Why a mock battle?"* anymore. They both already got that this was happening so Calkoro could assess Kana's fighting skills and had moved on. Ranyi was the only one who'd failed to figure it out and asked a dumb question, causing Sally to take pity on her. Ranyi figured Lightning just thought of her as a talking tree or a rock.

But if Ranyi got herself down about stuff like that every single time, then she really would wind up being pathetic, so she put on a deliberately cheery tone and said, "Oh yeah, of course," with a clap of her hands.

"So what do we do?" asked Sally. "We wanna know the transfer student's skills, too, yeahhh?"

"Giving Calkoro what she wants feels quite vexing, but I suppose we have no choice," said Lightning.

Ranyi didn't know what "vexing" meant, but she knew enough to ask a question here to keep from ending the conversation. "The transfer student's been goin' to the new school buildin', too, hasn't she?"

Pshuke momentarily put her cursing and glaring at the other groups on hold to turn to Lightning. "Die… She can go and die… sticking her nose in places; she's looking into something."

Lightning cupped a hand around her mouth and opened her lips without making a sound. That meant to discuss so that the other groups couldn't hear. All the members of Group Three could lip-read.

"Let's try getting a little serious about this," Lightning mouthed,

and Pshuke responded, *"Why bother?"* in irritation. *"Since we want to see what the transfer student can do,"* Lightning answered, *"and I want to see the frustration on Mephis's face,"* she continued with a bewitching smile.

Despite feeling practically hypnotized by Lightning's smile, Ranyi also put forth a number of ideas of her own, and Group Three talked strategy: how they'd defeat homunculi efficiently, and how they would get the best of the other groups. Eventually, Calkoro called everyone to gather, and Diko flashed a toothy grin.

◇ Calkoro

While watching as the students discussed with their groups, Calkoro thought back on what had happened that afternoon. She'd gone to the principal's office to inform Halna as to how Kana was doing, but there, she'd learned about Kana's shocking move instead. Going to the principal—the great deputy chief of the Information Bureau—to ask who had recommended all the students was not the act of a sane person.

What's more, Halna said she'd just told Kana what she wanted to know. Both of these things were absolutely out of the ordinary. Kana was casually crossing whatever lines Calkoro could conceive of. When it came to Halna, Calkoro thought that being like that had to be the reason she'd been so unusually successful in her career, while she figured that Kana jumping into things like this had to be what had sent her on the route from arrest to imprisonment. Neither were the type Calkoro wanted in her life, but since she was now involved whether she liked it or not, she had no choice but to associate with them, while taking care to keep the damage from extending to herself.

Halna had said she'd done it to see what Kana would do with the information. She said she wanted to figure out why Kana had entered the school and how capable she was. And for the capabilities part, Halna had ordered Calkoro to hold rec time so she could determine her physical abilities and observe her.

Calkoro doubted it would really be that easy, but she couldn't argue.

With the casual thought that a mock battle—and a more realistic one—might be better than team sports for judging basic

athleticism, she'd settled on doing a mock battle. All she'd been thinking was *Well, do your best, I suppose*, but for some reason, Groups One and Three were discussing with unusual enthusiasm.

While Calkoro was very uneasy about this, she couldn't take it back now. So she checked the security cameras installed in the gym so that she could least make a proper recording, if something happened.

◇ Kumi-Kumi

They never did get to talk about how they'd win the mock battle. Since one member of their group had never fought with homunculi before—more precisely, she had no memory of it—the rest of Group Two were all mobilized to make sure Kana memorized the basic rules and what training-use homunculi were. By the time she finally had everything, the battle was about to begin. Calkoro blew the whistle.

"We're getting started now, so please gather round."

Group One was to the right of the entrance, Group Two was to the left of the entrance, Group Three was in the center, in front of the stage, and the cluster of a few dozen homunculi were gathered in the middle of the gym in a circle with their backs to one another. The jet-black, featureless homunculi had no eyes, noses, or mouths. Aside from that, they were simply made: You could just barely identify their arms and legs. The units for practice were particularly simple in construction. Kumi-Kumi had heard before that it was so that destroying them didn't cause mental strain. But when you actually tried fighting them, you had to wonder if it was a simple issue of budget.

Calkoro blew the starting whistle.

The homunculi split into groups and went into action, and the magical girls set into motion all at once. With Lightning in the lead, Group Three attacked the homunculi as a single arrow, while Arlie from Group One ran out at an angle to obstruct them. From Group Two, only Mephis headed toward Group Three, while the other members ran for the homunculi.

"Let's go!"

Rappy and Tetty swung Dory, who was bundled up in a wrap, around and tossed her like a sling. Centrifugal force accelerated

Dory to send her slamming into a cluster of homunculi. Her drill tip struck one, carving its torso away and spraying fluids around. Dory swung her drill with a wild shriek, the spinning tool making a grating din as she took down another. The homunculi responded quickly, reconstructing their circle formation, covering for one another as they backed away from the drill.

Kumi-Kumi knit her eyebrows. It was frustrating that Dory had stolen first blood, but she'd acknowledge Group One's good teamwork. That wasn't the problem. The problem was how the homunculi were behaving.

They hadn't seemed at all intelligent in the mock battles before. They'd been nothing more than sandbags that obeyed Calkoro's signal to attack, then got beaten down. But this time, they were responding to Dory's actions and coordinating as a group in battle. And when they did things like punch or kick, they avoided obstructing the other homunculi and aimed for their enemies' backs. If their functionality had been improved, then the girls couldn't fight the same as they had before.

Kumi-Kumi swung down her pickax, striking at the herd of homunculi a beat behind the others. The homunculus backed away, and her swing hit air, but Lillian had strung a navy-blue thread on the pickax, which pulled her in a flying leap past Kumi-Kumi to kick at the enemy. Lillian struck the homunculus in the face with both feet, knocking it back. Intellect aside, it seemed their durability wasn't much different from the last time.

Meanwhile, Lightning, Sally, and Pshuke from Group Three had broken past Arlie and Mephis to reach the homunculi. If Group Two didn't get moving, Group Three would take all the points. Adelheid swiped at a homunculus, slicing it open, but it was a shallow wound. The other units immediately came to its aid, preventing Adelheid from finishing it off. But that also meant three homunculi were now gathered in one place. Lillian tossed a big ball of yarn in a light underhand, and Kumi-Kumi swung her pickax as hard as she could. The ball of yarn turned to small cubes to hit the homunculi like buckshot, and when they flinched, Adelheid stepped in like a thunderclap to slash thrice with frightening speed, slicing the black forms to shreds.

One unit tried to flee, despite being in shreds, but Kumi-Kumi blocked its escape, scooping upward with her pickax to plunge into the homunculus. The pickax disassembled inanimate objects into

cubes, but her magic had no effect on living creatures, so it worked like a direct weapon instead.

She tossed the impaled homunculus off her weapon. It flew up almost to the ceiling, then fell to the floor with a splat. Black fluids scattered all over, hitting Kumi-Kumi as well, but it didn't smell and wasn't poisonous, and it disappeared immediately.

All right, next, she was thinking, readying her pickax, when Calkoro blew the whistle.

"Okay, stop. Everyone freeze and stay where you are, please."

Looking over, Kumi-Kumi saw Princess Lightning with her hand up. As everyone was murmuring, "What happened?" Lightning approached Calkoro, and the two exchanged a few words; she accompanied the teacher to the spot where the homunculus had just fallen, pointing to the floor as she said something.

Calkoro flicked the beads of her abacus as she leaned close to the floor, then nodded. "I acknowledge Lightning's observation. Kumi-Kumi, you're out."

"Huh…? Why me?"

"The impact of the homunculus's fall dented the floor."

Kumi-Kumi had overdone it. Now that she thought about it, it really hadn't been necessary to throw it all the way to the ceiling. With Mephis's jeers following her, Kumi-Kumi's shoulders slumped, and she climbed up to the stage to sit there alone with her knees in front of her, watching.

"All right, resume." Calkoro blew her whistle, then immediately started flicking the beads of her abacus. It seemed she was calculating each group's points. Kumi-Kumi looked back down over the combat area. A little ways away from the cluster of homunculi, two magical girls were facing off. It was Mephis and Diko. Kumi-Kumi would rather Mephis try obstructing all of Group Three as opposed to just distracting Diko, but ask Mephis, and she was sure to say one-on-one was the best way to fight.

"C'mon and try a little harder, Diko." Mephis bared a threatening grin at her, and Diko answered by raising the corners of her lips in a smile. The two magical girls continued to face off, glaring at each other. They were so close their shoulders just about bumped, but they didn't touch. Everyone remembered Calkoro explaining that attacking classmates was against the rules. Mephis and Diko both broke into a run at almost the same instant. Mephis's mouth moved, and Diko's cheeks twisted up in a spasm. Mephis was

whispering something to Diko.

The words of the demon would corrupt the soul. If Mephis whispered, *"You don't have to work that hard; this is just some dumb old rec time, right?"* it would make Diko think, *Yeah, that's right*, and convince herself it was true, and she'd find herself slacking off. To a magical girl who was aware of Mephis's magic and had strong mental fortitude, it was nothing more than a mild hindrance, but when you were in the middle of focusing hard and reading each other, that hindrance got much nicer results.

Diko attempted to slip under Mephis's arm like she was sliding to a base, but before she could, Mephis's hand reached out. She threw her arm out in the most perfect way to not be seen as an attack. Diko grinned, and the medallion on her arm transformed, warping limply like a living creature, and a large eye opened in the center.

The moment her one-eyed medallion opened its eye, Diko vanished. Mephis clicked her tongue, running ahead. This was Diko's magic. She could vanish at any time, though only for an instant. When they'd played hide-and-seek during rec time, she'd used this magic to dominate the game.

And Mephis had been angrier than any of them, then. This must have brought back that memory, as she was yelling as she chased after Diko. It really looked like Diko was the one playing her. Maybe having Diko deal with Mephis was Group Three's plan.

Kumi-Kumi cupped both hands around her mouth like a megaphone, yelling from the stage, "Mephis! Never mind Diko! Go for the homunculi!"

"Fuck that!" Mephis yelled back, totally ignoring Kumi-Kumi's instructions. She and Diko were running side by side at a fixed distance apart from each other, gradually moving away from where everyone else was. She was so obviously being played just like Diko wanted it, but Mephis was the only one who hadn't noticed.

And over at the main scene of action, a thick fog blocked the field of view. That was Pshuke from Group Three's magic. Kumi-Kumi focused on the fog to try to see what was going on inside, but she couldn't see through it. Some hazy figures could be seen in there, but it wasn't even clear if they were homunculi or magical girls. Wouldn't that make it difficult even for Group Three to do anything? What were they trying to do? Kumi-Kumi could hear something moving and something clashing, but she still didn't know

what they were doing. The sound of abacus beads flicking nearby also gradually quieted. There wasn't any way for a referee to count.

Then someone cried out from within the mist. "Ref!"

The mist cleared. All the magical girls and homunculi had stopped fighting, and one of them was glancing all around her. Dory's gaze stopped on her fallen drill, which she happily scooped up.

Lightning pointed at Dory, then called out in a lovely, sonorous voice, "Dory damaged the floor when she dropped her drill."

Dory wailed sharply. Sometimes you could make out the words "made meee" mixed in with her wailing. In other words, she was insisting that she hadn't dropped it herself but that someone else had made her drop it. Lightning offered a sarcastic shrug. There was no proof since nobody had been able to see through the mist. If anyone had been able to get close, maybe they would have seen, and if what Dory insisted was true, then someone probably had come up to her and made her drop her weapon, but if nobody had seen it, then what she said wouldn't count.

"Hold up!" Someone called for a stop. It was Rappy.

Rappy, at Dory's side, squatted down on the spot, reaching to the floor to pick something up. She was peeling off some transparent wrap. The whole area had been covered by her magic wrap.

Calkoro approached and checked the floor, then made a big circle with her arms. "Safe! No damage!"

Group One cried out in joy, and Dory hugged Rappy.

Lightning turned away from Dory as if she'd lost interest, and next, she pointed at Adelheid. "Then over there, referee."

"Wait, naw, hold yer horses! Someone smacked mah sword down!" Adelheid was holding her military saber in her arms, but it seemed she'd just picked it up after dropping it.

Group Three's response to Adelheid's assertion that there had been violence in the fog was flatly arguing that they had done no such thing, insisting that there was no video evidence. The fact was that since everything had been covered in the mist, nobody aside from those involved had caught any violence.

Calkoro's arbitration was somewhat neutral and somewhat careless: She made it so that from now on, Pshuke was not to use her magic, while also recognizing that Adelheid had broken the rules. Looking at Mephis, Kumi-Kumi saw she was glaring with

murder in her eyes at Group Three.

"Mephis! Keep cool!" Kumi-Kumi called.

"Ya can't lose yer head! That's just what they want!" Adelheid yelled along with her, and Kumi-Kumi shifted her gaze to Group One. Group Three was going beyond pushing the rules—they were *breaking* the rules, but Group One was playing a tight game, too. Rappy had fully anticipated Group Three's trick to block the field of view to break the rules. Thinking about it, it seemed both Groups One and Three had managed to have a full strategy meeting in the time before the mock battle had started. Group Two had lost that time purely on explaining things to Kana; they never had time to come up with a plan.

Oh yeah, so then what's Kana up to? Kumi-Kumi wondered and looked over to see her standing in front of a homunculus, not particularly in a fighting stance.

As for what she'd been doing, it became clear when Calkoro's whistle blew. She was talking to the homunculus. Her magic was supposed to be to get answers from asking them questions or something like that. Was she trying to ask the homunculi questions to learn their weaknesses?

"Kana! Fight!" Kumi-Kumi cried.

"Ya can't be standin' around here!" added Adelheid.

Kana's head turned toward them, and she opened her mouth to say something, but then got kicked in the side of the head by a homunculus and fell, her back hitting the floor to roll and slide away.

At the end of the day, the homunculi's attack power was no joke. During the mock battle in April, Kumi-Kumi hadn't been used to it yet, and she'd taken a few good whacks, too.

Mephis was playing tag with Diko. They were both making use of countless high-level techniques—with their feints, the magic they wove in, how they faked out with their eyes, their body movements, and footwork. But in the sense that they couldn't be counted as an asset to their teams, they were no different from Kana.

A crow that shone the color of darkness rose up to skim the roof, then from there suddenly dropped toward the ground at Lillian's feet. It was Sally Raven's crow, controlled by her magic.

It wasn't trying to slam into Lillian—it was just flapping its wings around her legs to get in her way, making Lillian's footing unsteady. Being the lone attacker Group Two had left, she had to

fight, but she couldn't deal with homunculi when the crow was getting in her way.

"That thing of Sally's is bogus," complained Adelheid.

"It looks like…Calkoro…won't blow the whistle," said Kumi-Kumi.

"That were a right hassle when we were playin' portball. So anythin' goes when it's a summon, is that it?"

Sally had her crow obstruct while she attacked the homunculi, defeating one in a pincer attack between herself and Lightning. She showed her back to invite the homunculi to attack, then blocked its field of view with her own body while she had Lightning attack over her shoulder to take down another, and when a unit came swaying toward her, she punched it down with a backfist, and the whistle blew.

"Sally Raven, rule violation."

Ah, Kumi-Kumi thought and looked over to see that the homunculus Sally had punched was no homunculus. It was Miss Ril, who had made her whole body jet-black like a homunculus. Taking Tetty's hand to come to her feet, she plucked the black fragment she'd been holding from her palm and handed it to Arlie. Arlie stuck the fragment into the spot in her shoulder armor where a chip had been missing.

Miss Ril could use any mineral she held in her hand to transform the material of her body. By clasping a fragment of Arlie's armor, she'd turned her entire body black, then mingled among the attacking homunculi to approach Sally and take a hit. Thinking about it now, the texture of Arlie's armor was a little like the homunculi's bodies.

As Sally came up to the stage with a bashful expression, Adelheid smiled at her. "Ya done goofed, Sally."

"Yeahhh, they got me. I wanted to score a few more points, though."

"Y'all in Group Three are on fire today, huh? Ah thought it was just us goin' hog wild fer this."

"Ahhh yeahhh, that's on Her Highness's request. She's been uncharacteristically enthusiastic about this for some reason."

That meant Sally was working so hard for Princess Lightning. If Kumi-Kumi were to ask, *"So then why does Lightning want that?"* Sally probably wouldn't answer.

With Sally out, she couldn't intervene with her crows anymore,

and there was now more space on the battlefield.

Group Three's attackers were Lightning and Pshuke. But if Pshuke made one wrong shot with her water gun, it would do more than just hit homunculi, and she'd also been disallowed from obstructing the view with mist, so she had no choice but to fight hand-to-hand instead. With both Rappy and Miss Ril obstructing them, the former wielding her wrap for defense and the latter's blinding figure sparkling every time she moved, trying to get hit if possible, they really seemed to be having a hard time.

Group One had Dory and Tetty on the offensive. Dory would dash in to scatter the homunculi, and when they ran away, Tetty grabbed them, plucking out the parts in her grip. When she took an arm, she ripped it off, and when she took a head, she crushed it—an utterly gruesome spectacle. For her own part, Tetty just did it dispassionately and mechanically. Ranyi was trying to obstruct Group One, but Arlie's iron guard wouldn't let her get close.

The only attacker Group Two had right now was Lillian. She made traps to catch ankles, tangled up enemies with a whip, and blocked attacks with a shield, only to instantly unravel the shield into a net for capture, toying with the homunculi with her rainbow-colored knitting, but she lacked enough attack power to take out a homunculus in one strike.

"Mephis! She needs you!" Kumi-Kumi cried.

"Mephiiiis! Just drop Diko!" Adelheid echoed her.

Mephis howled. She wasn't even trying to hide her wrath. Diko, facing off against her, dodged to the right, evading Mephis's charge. Mephis didn't slow down, barreling into the crowd of homunculi. Kumi-Kumi personally would have preferred she work together with Lillian to fight, but if she yelled that now, who knew if Mephis would even hear it. She was so angry, her face and eyes were red.

A homunculus tried to block Mephis's kick and was flung back—Lillian caught it with a shield, and Mephis ran up to it and fired two jabs, then a straight with all her back in it to crush its head.

Even if Mephis didn't understand, Lillian would. If she could do a good job as support, even if they were unlikely to win, maybe they could wrangle second place.

Right as the light of hope that Kumi-Kumi hadn't seen so much as a flicker of before was finally starting to shine, Miss Ril came around. Since now Group Two had more fighting force, well, it was logical that Group One would come to obstruct, but Mephis roared

as if to say this was obviously her right, baring her teeth at Miss Ril like an animal threat.

"Mephis! Calm down! Don't attack Miss Ril!" Kumi-Kumi cried.

"Two gals out is enough!" Adelheid joined in.

With a face like she was crushing her anger in her teeth, Mephis punched a homunculus. Since now she was being careful not to touch Miss Ril, she couldn't beat them down as quickly as she had before.

Group Three's attacker team had lost one obstructor, and they had Diko coming back, so they regained their momentum. Diko vanished and got behind a homunculus, and she, Lightning, and Pshuke pincered it from the front and rear. They went on taking out homunculi at a good tempo.

Things were still going smoothly for Group One, which had no obstructors. Tetty was death on contact, and Dory was incredibly good at throwing the homunculi into disarray, so with them as a team, the homunculi were nothing to them, no matter how many there were.

Miss Ril turned toward Group Three. Group Two didn't seem like competition for first place, so it seemed rather than obstructing them, she considered it best to go back to obstructing Group Three. Group Two should be very thankful she thought that way, but knowing Mephis this long, Kumi-Kumi knew she would see it as an insult, basically, *"You're not worth paying attention to."*

Mephis howled. Panicking, Miss Ril started turning back to her.

Mephis stepped forward to the side, opposite the direction Miss Ril's head had turned. Her initial velocity was incredible. With her second step, she left Miss Ril behind, and then with her third step, there was a streak of light.

An explosive crackling sound rang out, followed by an intense light that made it hard to keep your eyes open. Sally, who'd been watching the battle from the stage, cried out in pain, while Adelheid shouted, "What in tarnation?!" And if the light was that powerful seen from the stage, seeing it up close had to be unbearable. Kumi-Kumi's narrowed eyes gradually opened, and she saw what was going on. Mephis was curled on the ground, pressing both her eyes. A homunculus approached from behind, swinging down its arm; Tetty leaped in from the side, thrust Mephis away, and grabbed the homunculus's claws to crush them.

Calkoro blew the whistle. "Tetty Goodgripp, rule violation for

attacking Mephis Pheles."

Tetty just muttered "Ah," shoulders dropping. She must have acted on the spur of the moment. Forgetting it was against the rules and defending Mephis really seemed like something Tetty would do. Mephis's response was similarly predictable.

Mephis got up and placed her hands on Tetty's shoulders. "You thought you were saving me?"

"Well, um, listen. It's like my body just moved, you know?"

Mephis smashed the top of her head into the bridge of Tetty's nose, and Kumi-Kumi rushed over to stop the fight.

◇ Pythie Frederica

Glasswork magical girls danced atop the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The item had been made-to-order on the motif of a revolving lantern, and she'd also commissioned each one of the magical girls individually from first-rate craftsmen. Appearing and vanishing, there was a punk rocker strumming a guitar that sprayed magical notes, a girl in a white coat and glasses over a swimsuit, a schoolgirl holding a weapon like a spear or *naginata*, and a clown who juggled while balancing on a ball, as well as various other magical girls.

In contrast to the lavishly gold-encrusted chandelier, the interior of the room it illuminated was very simple. It had two sofas facing each other, a large table, and a check-patterned carpet.

On the smaller sofa was the fortune-teller-style magical girl Pythie Frederica, casually sitting with her legs folded to the side, while in the corner of the room crouched a magical girl bound with chains and talismans. She didn't even twitch, and just looking at her, it was hard to tell if she was alive or dead.

Frederica pulled out a mount that was soft to the touch, placing it atop the table. She had been told it was an item of the highest quality, made of magically infused artisanal silk. She then set her crystal ball on the mount, which was exceptionally stable; it kept her crystal ball perfectly in place, and the quality of the cushion supported it properly. It was always so satisfying to personally select an item, regardless of expense.

Frederica stroked the crystal ball with her right hand. There was a different hair wrapped around each of her fingers.

An image popped up in her crystal ball. A magical girl with a small plate in her right hand was in front of a big pot, scowling. Her blue necktie was fluttering in the heat rising from the pot. It seemed Panas was working hard at her hobby again that day. Whatever sort of ramen would she come up with?

"The flavors aren't coming together. I put in too many mushrooms; maybe that's why it's so all over the place."

It seemed cooking her broth hadn't gone well. Being unable to enjoy smell and taste of whatever she was viewing was one of the many flaws of Frederica's magic. Not wanting to be tortured on and on by tasty-looking food dangled in front of her, she switched the image.

Magical girls were gathered at what looked to be behind a school. They were Caspar Faction girls—the Elite Guard who attended that school, plus Adelheid, and they seemed to be talking about something.

"You guys are so useless."

"No…Mephis…you can't…criticize others, this time…"

"What was that?"

"If yer talkin' about who's useless, then me and Kumi-Kumi were, too, for gettin' booted out early. And Kana, well, she wasn't useful. And you had Diko stringin' ya along the whole time, Mephis, runnin' off away from the game. 'Bout the only one who did a proper job this time was Lillian, don'cha think?"

"Diko's the biggest gun in that game, and I was luring her away from the battlefield! Whaddaya mean, I wasn't doing my job? That's bullshit. I was busting my ass."

"Even if ya were bustin' yer rear over there, Ah think startin' up a tussle with Tetty and gettin' kicked off the field puts ya out."

"That was Tetty's fault! That little bitch!"

What a waste, having such a trivial quarrel when they had this great opportunity to be magical girls in middle school. Just watching it was depressing, so Frederica switched the image.

A mage and magical girl were facing each other in what looked like a reception room with sofas. The mage was an agent of the Caspar Faction, while the magical girl was a veteran from the Archfiend Cram School. Both of them were nasty schemers.

"I have need of some magical girls," said the mage. He looked like he'd just sneaked out of a Halloween party, what with his navy-blue suit, gray necktie, and triangle hat. The magical girl, who was

beyond relaxed on the sofa—basically lying down—straightened up to listen to him.

"I'd like you to introduce me to some available graduates of the Archfiend Cram School," the mage continued.

"Again? I introduced you to Amy and Monako, didn't I? And even Adelheid."

"Oh no, I'm grateful for that. All the magical girls you've brought to us were quite wonderful. But nevertheless, we've wound up short on help again."

"You sound like a convenience store that's always hiring part-timers."

"If you're referring to the exploitative work environment… Well, my complaining won't get us anywhere. Be that as it may, we just need some personnel."

"If you're gathering as many as you can, it'll be a hell of a lot of girls. Trying to empty your cash vaults?"

"I'm told we may clear out the Caspar Faction's coffers."

The magical girl rose to her feet. "What're you trying to do? Are you trying to stage a coup? I can't advise that, okay?"

"Not to worry; it's nothing quite as difficult as a coup."

"Oooh!" The magical girl grinned. From her toothy smile, you could see into her nasty character. Frederica thought well of her.

The students who had been sent into the magical-girl class by the various political forces were not only professionals—among them were several good, honest students. Toss in a brute who was fond of bloodbaths, and you'd find yourself with a situation so awful and tragic it would make even Frederica balk. When Snow White came to try to stop it, what would she do? Or would she not stop it and just mourn her own powerlessness? Would she put herself on the line to face the both of them, fail to accomplish her goal, and fall? No. She was bound to easily surpass Frederica's expectations. Frederica was sure of it. Just imagining it made Frederica grin from ear to ear.

Thinking about Snow White, she switched the image in her crystal ball.

Nothing showed up; it merely sat there. Frederica waited one minute, then two, but even after waiting three whole minutes, nothing happened, and Frederica canceled her magic.

Snow White had not appeared. The hair tied around Frederica's ring finger definitely belonged to Snow White, so it was fair to

assume she'd done something to block it. These days, she did have a mage working with her. Was she repelling Frederica's crystal ball with magic or using some other method?

Frederica's shoulders shook as she laughed, and the tied-up magical girl squirmed in discomfort.

CHAPTER 5
THE PLACE WHERE I BELONG

◇ **Calkoro**

She wished she could have pretended she didn't see that scuffle between Mephis and Tetty. But the other students kicked up a fuss and tried to stop them, and now that it had turned into this much of a kerfuffle, Calkoro really couldn't close her eyes and ignore it.

Calkoro peeled the pair apart, and as a lazy sort of mediation, she had them shake hands and bow to each other. It wasn't really a fight, more just Mephis attacking Tetty, but Tetty didn't complain, solemnly obeying the teacher's instructions. The aggressor, on the other hand, whined and whined, cursing on and on, "Why me?" and "Shit" and "Moron," while making no move at all to apologize. Calkoro went to her last resort—declaring the class wouldn't end until Mephis said sorry—and finally wrung an insincere apology out of her. Mephis clearly didn't like it but didn't have a choice, so she reluctantly complied.

They went back to the classroom, and even once modern magical-girl criminal history began for sixth period, the whole class still felt tense, with Mephis scowling and irritated and Tetty glancing over at her apologetically. They couldn't have a calm class like this.

"Even after her death, the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, inspired some magical girls to wreak havoc. Gatling Parako and Halberd Emilin traveled around together committing robberies—oh, pardon me, it was Gatling Parako and Halberd Emimin."

Even the teacher couldn't keep it together. Calkoro decided that in order to get closure for the incident, she needed to draw the line somewhere.

Calkoro ordered Mephis to write a two-page apology essay

reflecting on her actions before she went home. Mephis gave Calkoro a murderous glare, but Calkoro was not bothered—or at least, she straightened her back so she didn't seem like she was—and ordered Mephis one more time. The girl's group members dragged her back to her seat.

Since Tetty was largely a victim here, a verbal admonishment was enough.

But more important than Tetty was Kana. Calkoro took her to the teacher's office as well to ask her why she hadn't attacked the homunculi at all during the mock battle. Kana remained expressionless but at least responded obediently:

"There's no need to be considerate of a homunculus's privacy, so I thought I could make full use of my magic. I questioned the homunculi in order to extract their weaknesses, and I'd say my efforts were very successful. The homunculi have three major weaknesses. They can't disobey the one with administrator permissions. When exposed to strong light, especially sunlight, they slow down. And they have an implanted instinct to avoid attacking allies, no matter what. That last one, about instinct, must have been done because the homunculi aren't very intelligent. So rather than educating them not to attack their allies, they are commanded though a sort of logical setting that operates on instinct in order to prevent friendly fire. But seeing how they were made intelligent enough to understand my speech, I do think perhaps education after the fact would have been better than an instinct. I think that's most likely an issue of cost, though."

Calkoro had no idea if Kana was mocking her, or speaking seriously, or if she had lost her mind. Calkoro felt an intense pressure from her. Calkoro told her it was fine so long as she wasn't slacking off, then sent her away.

Inferring from the way Kana spoke, she was pretty old, pretransformation. Spinning her pen in her fingers, Calkoro also realized that perhaps she was a mage. Calkoro had been surreptitiously watching Kana in the gym. Kana had pointed to the floor of the gym and said she'd never seen magical inscriptions like these before. That very much sounded like something a mage ignorant to the common knowledge of the outside world would say.

Unusually, Halna was still in the principal's office doing desk work. Calkoro reported to her about Kana's behavior, with the provision that this was ultimately only her own guess.

And then Halna laughed her down. “What an absurd idea.”

“No, um, yes, I apologize,” Calkoro replied. “I hope you’ll just let that go as one of my silly ideas.”

“Indeed. Silly ideas are fine for what they are. Simply considering matters is worthwhile. If one out of a hundred is a correct answer, and there is a superior who can catch it, that makes silly ideas worthwhile.”

Calkoro realized Halna wasn’t angry. Privately relieved, she looked up at her boss. Whether Halna had timed it, or whether it was a coincidence, Halna had her index finger thrust up in front of Calkoro’s eyes, and Calkoro flailed backward, somehow avoiding landing on her backside.

“Nothing came to mind as you were observing them?” Halna asked.

“Well…um.”

“I don’t mean just Kana. Tell me about the other students, too. There wasn’t anything different from usual?” Halna’s words, attitude, and forward-leaning stance all indicated that she’d already gained her answer. Namely, Calkoro would have to go along with the answers that Halna wanted. If she came up with something too far off the mark, then Halna would scold her, and she’d be judged as less for it.

“Oh, yes,” Calkoro said. “Ummm, well… First of all, Kana was in the group. I can’t say she did well…”

“You don’t need to get into the specifics.”

“Oh, pardon me… Um, aside from her… Yes, one of the girls got too rough…”

Halna’s right eye twitched. That was not the answer she wanted. A cold streak of sweat dripped down Calkoro’s back.

“Well, that was a part of things, but there was also, more importantly… Yes, more initiative, I’d say, like passion for… competition, I’d call it. Mephis Pheles has always been enthusiastic about games, but Groups One and Three… Group Three in particular gave me the sense that they’re better at bringing magic into the game. Last time, it was more…primitive, I suppose, and the girls won purely through athleticism and mastery of their magic, but this time Group Three didn’t hold back with showing off their magic, while Group One got inventive and even made use of magic that didn’t seem like it could be brought into the game.”

Halna leaned back, sitting more deeply in her chair as she

folded her fingers and placed both hands on her desk. “They’ve become greedier about victory.”

“I think…you could put it that way.”

Halna’s expression twisted up as if she were most sincerely aggrieved. Her pretty features and her position made that dreadful expression all the more fearsome. While Calkoro understood that the brunt of her anger was not directed at her, nevertheless, there was no guarantee that would always be the case.

Calkoro’s shoulders trembled, and she shrank in on herself.

Halna pushed back her chair, and with her fingers still laced together, she lowered them to her lap. “It seems there are some with nasty ideas…and they’ve set their sights on this school.”

“Huh? Yes.”

“Keep a close watch on the transfer student. And report in detail.”

Calkoro didn’t have the right to shoot back, *“Watching her is damaging to my mental health.”* Her only option was to swiftly nod as if to say she’d been thinking just the same thing.

As soon as she was out of the room, a sigh swept out of her. Starting off with Kana’s arrival, and then with lunchtime and the rec time, it had been a long day with no opportunity to rest her heart. Thinking back on it drew another sigh from her.

◇ Tetty Goodgripp

The day was about done, and she was downright tired.

Mephis was staying behind to write that apology essay, while Kana had been called out for slacking off during the mock battle and had been taken to the teacher’s office, and Fujino was complaining along with Miss Ril and Rappy about what a tough day it had been.

“Oh yeah, so did you give that back?” Fujino asked Miss Ril quietly.

“I missed my opportunity,” she replied in an even softer voice.

Right before the mock battle had begun, Princess Lightning had slipped over to Group One and handed over her costume dagger to Miss Ril, saying, “Here.”

“What’s this about?” Miss Ril had asked, not getting what this

meant, and Princess Lightning had pushed a scrap of notepaper at her, as if she'd prepared it beforehand.

She'd written a letter: *Group Two has a bunch of strong girls, so if we do this normally, they'll have the advantage. So why don't we work together? You don't have to blatantly only obstruct Group Two. It's enough if you just go for Group Two when you can't decide which side to obstruct. I'll lend you this dagger as proof of my intentions. I hope this will help you nicely.*

Though Dory and Arlie chittered their glee, the others were mostly confused. Two teams getting together to target the other went against the spirit of fair play.

Group One got into a huddle and discussed.

"What do we do?" asked Tetty.

"It feels kinda *eh* to be giving it back now!" said Rappy. "So then, well, whatever, let's use it?"

"But I'd feel a bit badly about it…," said Miss Ril. "Mephis really did seem intent on winning, after all."

"But like, how are we gonna use that? We're not actually gonna use a blade, right?!"

Before you knew it, the discussion of whether they should use it or not turned into a discussion of how to use it, and they came up with the plan of Miss Ril secretly holding on to it to change her substance into the same as Lightning's dagger, then instantly generating a blinding flash. And that did make Tetty want to try using it. So they decided to first take a vote to make the decision, and three were in favor: Dory, Arlie, and Rappy. Two were against: Miss Ril and Tetty. So they used Lightning's dagger.

All through the game, Tetty felt guilty. Tetty had known once it went to a vote that they'd wind up using it. Rappy had acted like she wasn't against using it, and Dory and Arlie were openly glad of the boost to their arsenal. Miss Ril didn't seem enthusiastic about it, but even if Tetty voted on her side, it was clear that with three against two, the "use it" side would win.

She did want to win. She saw Group Two as competition, and she also felt petulant about Lightning not seeing Group One as equal opponents. It was true that maybe their group was a step behind in some places, but if they put together a proper strategy, then even Group One should be able to put up a good fight. When they'd come up with the idea of Miss Ril secretly having Lightning's dagger and using her magic, Tetty had been mentally going *Yesss!*

in joy, and it really made her want to use the idea they'd come up with.

She just thought, for appearance's sake, they shouldn't use it. That was why she'd chosen to make the decision through majority rule, so that she herself could be against it, while the will of the group as a whole made them use it. It was far sneakier than honestly thinking to make use of it. It was something that Cutie Healer or Hiyoko would never do.

The good-natured members of Fujino's group never even imagined what their group leader had prepared herself to do; they all wound up saying, "What a tough day," and that was the end of it.

Since every student used their own individual gate to go to and from school, they weren't together on their way home and went their separate ways after school. But Fujino didn't feel like going home—she didn't feel like staying in the classroom, either, where the seething Mephis was scraping her pencil over draft paper. So Fujino dragged her feet through the halls, walking into the bathroom when she didn't have to go, then headed outdoors along the covered walkway and stood in front of the gymnasium for a while.

No matter how much she waffled, there was only one home for her to return to. Blowing a sigh, she was about to head to the gate in the courtyard when someone called out to her.

It was Calkoro. "Tetty, there's something I wanted to ask you; do you have a moment?"

"Sure…what is it?" she replied.

"It's about the incident during rec time today."

Her heart pounded in her chest. The very thing she'd been worrying over suddenly being spoken out hit her like a tsunami.

"Group One has, well, come up with lots of ideas, compared to last time." The way the teacher put it, "come up with lots of ideas," could be taken in any way, and it felt like a stab in the heart to Fujino, who wondered how to reply.

Calkoro continued, "Rappy putting her wrap on the floor, and what Miss Ril did at the end—"

Her heart wouldn't stop pounding. Did Calkoro know and this was an accusation, or was she purely praising her? This teacher hardly ever praised her students—and Fujino had definitely never

heard from anyone that she had approached a student after school to do something like that.

She gave Calkoro's face another look. She couldn't divine the teacher's thoughts from her expression. *Calm down*, she told herself.

"Miss Ril made that powerful flash, didn't she? Just what did she do, then?" Calkoro asked.

Fujino could see absolutely no ill will in the teacher's expression. Was she really just asking? But it gouged deep into Fujino's heart regardless. Taking a shallow breath, she put a hand to her chest. She heard a voice inside her. This was her chance. Whether Calkoro knew or not, if Fujino confessed her wrongdoing now, it would basically be a repentance. This flash of insight like a divine revelation made her heart leap high in her chest.

"We used a dagger borrowed from Princess Lightning." Her voice did not crack. She was able to speak completely naturally. *Ahhh, I've said it now*, she thought, but she also felt a release inside her chest, like a brisk spring breeze blowing in. "I gave it to Miss Ril to hold and had her pick the right moment to copy its nature."

Calkoro's eyebrows rose, her mouth in a small O. She was surprised.

Fujino let out a deep breath. She had finally confessed. Taking care not to say anything that would lay the deed on Lightning, she spoke as if she'd done it entirely of her own accord. And the fact was that Tetty had unquestionably been the one to make the decision. If someone was going to bear the sin, it shouldn't be Lightning or the rest of Group One. There was no one but Tetty.

Calkoro's expression gradually settled, and she closed her eyes with two deep nods. "Working together with another group?"

"Yes…that's right."

"And what would Group Three get out of this?"

The question brought Fujino's thoughts to a halt. She couldn't think of anything, but she opened her mouth anyway, figuring that she had to say something, and what came out was the same thing Lightning had said to her. "Group Two is the strongest, purely as fighters. Since we would be able to take down Group Two, um, Group Three would also…ah, benefit. And if Group Two comes last, then they would come second or higher."

Calkoro put her finger to her chin and muttered, "So they're feeling competitive," then pressed her lips in a tight line like she was thinking and didn't reply.

“Um, Ms. Calkoro.”

“Oh, pardon me. Sorry for stopping you here. Um…oh, that’s right. I didn’t expect you would be cooperating with Group Three. I suppose I should expect no less from a magical girl of the Information Bureau.”

With a “Bye for now,” Calkoro left, and Fujino dazedly watched her go. Fujino had meant to confess her wrongdoing, but the teacher hadn’t taken it as anything wrong and, if anything, had praised her for it.

Fujino squeezed her eyes shut. Her sense of right and wrong was wavering. Why had something like this happened? She’d been told she was with the Information Bureau, but how could anyone be a member of a department she’d never heard of? She couldn’t understand what Kana or Ms. Calkoro were talking about.

She headed out into the courtyard with unsteady feet, pushing the door to go in. Beside the brick road to the gate was someone in overalls, their back facing her. Fujino drew in a big breath, and that person turned around.

“Oh, if it isn’t Tetty.”

Fujino squatted down beside the mage, who’d just been weeding. The mage made to stop her, but she insisted. “Please, let me do it,” she said, grabbing weeds and pulling them from the soil.

“Um, so…,” Fujino began.

As the mage wiped sweat from their forehead with the white towel slung around their shoulders, Fujino steeled herself and asked, “Do you know about a place called the Information Bureau?”

“Well, yes,” the mage replied, “I do, but…why do you ask?”

“Multiple people have told me that I’m with the Information Bureau, but I don’t even know what that is. They still seem to think I’m involved with this bureau somehow—so just what is it?”

“Aha.” The mage looked up, causing Fujino to do the same. Several crows were flying through the red-tinged sunset. The mage kept gazing up at the sky for a while; a bead of sweat trailed down their chin, which they wiped off with the back of a garden glove. A streak of dirt across their chin looked just like a beard, and it disappeared when the mage wiped the glove in the other direction.

The mage turned back to Fujino. Their usual placid smile was now tense and sharp. It was a serious look. Naturally, Fujino’s face tightened up as well.

“You know that the Magical Kingdom has a variety of different

bureaus?" said the mage.

"Yes, although…I don't quite know the specifics."

"The Information Bureau is one of them. It's their job to gather information from various places." The mage let out a breath, then pointed to a bench, saying that this may get long, so how about they sit a bit. Mage and magical girl sat side by side.

"You're not a member of the Information Bureau, Tetty. But you're not completely unconnected to them. As to what that means…it was the Information Bureau that recommended you to this school."

Fujino clapped her hands with an *ah*. "So the people who know that think I'm from the Information Bureau?"

"That's probably the case. Everyone enrolled in this school has been recommended by departments or aristocrats of the Magical Kingdom. Most have recommended their subordinates…basically, they sent their own. So the people who know that you were recommended by the Information Bureau would assume you were with them."

"Um, I…don't know anything about the Information Bureau, and I only just found out what they do from you telling me…so why would they recommend me?"

"I told you the bureau gathers information, didn't I? They gather information on magical girls, too. Though I'm sure it won't feel good to hear they've gathered information on you, as well…"

"No, that's fine. I think it's necessary."

"I'm glad you would say that."

From the way the mage was speaking, Fujino realized—the mage she was talking to was a member of the Information Bureau. Kana had said before that someone from the bureau would never admit to it.

The mage straightened up and placed their hands on their lap. "I don't want to offend you, but first of all, there is the matter of money. Those who would struggle financially as magical girls are prioritized when bringing up candidates—"

Fujino was not offended, as the mage had suggested. In fact, she felt a tinge of warmth in her heart. Someone had noticed that Fujino was in a difficult situation, having lost her mother and being unable to continue school or as a magical girl. Fujino's hand came to her chest as she listened to the mage.

"—and of these, they are narrowed down based on character

and general lifestyle… Oh yes, you came to us with lots of ideas, didn't you, Tetty?"

"Huh? Those reached the higher-ups?"

"The Information Bureau is all about picking up anything you might call information, after all. The bureau has thought highly of your taking a proactive stance by suggesting ideas for improvement."

Fujino found herself biting her lip. She had to, or her tears would spill out. She'd thought the reports she'd written had just annoyed everyone and had been totally pointless, but someone had noticed them.

The mage gazed down at Fujino before a relieved expression spread across their face. They looked ahead at the vivid greenery of the ginkgo leaves swaying in the wind—Fujino loved the yellows of fall as well, but this was nice in its own way.

"Is there anything else you wanted to ask?" said the mage.

"Well…"

"You can talk to me about anything—any problems or things you're worried about. Honestly, it would help me out, too. And having an easier time at this school will mean the school improves, too."

She understood why the mage had been hinting that they were affiliated with the Information Bureau. They were trying to tell her, *"You can rely on me."* Now Fujino really felt ready to cry, but she held back her tears. She felt like if she cried now, it would not only be improper, it would also waste this person's consideration and kindness.

With gratitude for the mage's thoughtfulness—they were probably showing as much consideration as could be allowed, given their position—instead of tears, Fujino offered words. She told the mage everything: that she'd gone and used the dagger she'd accepted from Lightning, and that she'd used majority rule while understanding it was wrong to get what she wanted to happen, and that she'd been unable to apologize to Mephis—everything she'd been brooding over.

The mage listened to every word, reacting at times with a *hmm-hmm* to indicate they heard her. The mage took off their gloves and put them to the side, made a fist with their right hand, and stuck out their thumb to touch their jaw, falling into thought for a while in that pose. After a full minute, they nodded with a *mm-hmm*. "Is

this the first time that Lightning has…hmm, proposed cooperation?"

"Yes. It's never happened before," Fujino replied.

"Is that right…? I see, I see."

"Is there something about that…?"

"Oh no, nothing much at all. I just wanted to know if it was common or not. More importantly…did you want to make up with Mephis?"

Fujino's words caught in her throat. Did she want to make up with Mephis or not? Wanting to resolve class disputes, being grateful about things running smoothly—those were her desires as the student rep. But as Fujino, as Tetty, did she really want to make up with Mephis?

Fujino folded her arms and tried to think—and realized she didn't even have to think about it. "I want to make up."

"That's good."

"But…I think it might be hard."

"At times like this, you know, there's a straightforward way to resolve things."

"Is there a way to resolve things?"

"A gift. And you should find just the perfect one."

"The…perfect one?"

"Something expensive might confuse her, while conversely, something worthless will disappoint her. But look, there are things that are not blatantly officious but still wonderful. For example—like beautiful scenery."

Prefacing with, "Between you and me," the mage smiled wryly. "Taking care of the garden trees and pulling weeds like this is largely just a personal hobby. Only a limited few may come in here, so I play in the dirt without any chance of being seen."

A question mark rose in Fujino's mind. Right now, they were sitting on the bench in the courtyard. Fujino had been going through the courtyard twice a day to go to and from school, aside from weekends and holidays. There was nothing limited about that.

"I suppose you're confused. Only the ones who use the commute gate in the courtyard—in other words, you, Tetty—come and go through the courtyard, as an exception. Normally, you can't get in." The mage tossed their garden gloves down on the brick path. They landed softly, and instantly, a black something oozed out like a liquid but also like a solid from the cracks between the

bricks, grabbing the gloves and throwing them back on the bench before it slid back into the cracks.

Fujino pointed to the brick path with a trembling hand. “Th-that’s—”

“A security homunculus. Normally they won’t be seen, though. They help me out like this, and they can also capture foolhardy intruders. Oh, no need to be scared. They’re not frightening creatures, if you don’t do anything bad.”

Fujino hadn’t noticed them at all since she’d started school over a month ago. She audibly swallowed, let out a deep breath, and leaned against the bench’s backrest. “I didn’t know…”

“The students aren’t told, after all. Well, you just have to understand that these things are how we maintain security. So then about the gift I mentioned—how about showing Mephis this garden?”

“This garden?”

“It may not be terribly impressive…but I do think it’s a decently pretty garden. And I could let her sneak in while keeping it a secret.”

With its neatly cut lawn, the wooden bench with its charmingly rounded design, the little brick path, and arched gate with hearts on it, the garden was small, but that actually gave it a “secret garden” sort of feel, and the place had an atmosphere. Fujino wasn’t sure if it would suit Mephis’s tastes, but it would be a shame for nobody but her to be able to get a glimpse of this.

“And then once you have,” the mage continued, “you should offer Mephis an honest apology.”

“An honest apology…”

“She may be a little short-tempered sometimes, but she’s an openhearted, good girl. If you offer a proper apology, she’ll forgive you, and then it won’t drag on.”

That made Fujino think back to how Mephis had been, when they’d been in elementary school, when she had yet to become a magical girl—when Mephis was just Fuuko Sayama. She’d been something of a neighborhood bully, resorting to force when anything happened, but she didn’t drag out her fights forever. After trading blows with someone, the next day, they’d be joking around together.

Fujino made the decision that she would apologize to Mephis. Her heavy heart was lightened, as if she’d tied a balloon to it. Not

just over Mephis. Hearing about the Information Bureau had eased things for her, too. It felt like magic. Remembering that the person here was a mage, she nodded with a little smile. “You’re right. That would be best, huh. I’ll apologize.”

“Mm-hmm.” Nodding, the mage got a little smile like they were sincerely relieved, and seeing that, Fujino broke into a smile, too. The two of them gazed at the ginkgo swaying in the wind for a while, until eventually the mage said, “Right,” slapped their knees, and stood. “I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Oh…pardon me, I’ve been getting in the way.”

“No, no, not at all. I got to hear some good things today. Thank you.”

◇ Ranyi

There was a hesitant knock on the door. Sprawling in bed, Ranyi raised her head and called out, “C’mon in.” The door opened, and a mohawk popped in.

“C’min, c’min.” Ranyi got up, pulling out the wheeled chair in front of her computer desk. Tossing a cushion from the bed onto the chair, she turned it around to face the other way. Using her free foot to push aside the empty tissue boxes and plastic garbage bins piled in the way on the floor, she repeated, “C’min, yeah?” and offered her a seat. “Sorry the room’s so messy.”

Diko sat down on the chair, leaning her elbow on the desk. The height must not have been right, as she adjusted it, nodded, then sat back down. Though you might assume from her appearance that she was bold and unconventional, she could be surprisingly scrupulous and particular. “There’s something I want to ask.”

Ranyi closed just her right eye, resting her elbows on her knees, facing Diko in a forward-leaning stance. The two of them were agents in the middle of a top-secret mission. They lived as students in a magical-girl class, with an eye for postgraduation employment in their activities. But things were different when they had orders. Then, they would behave as instructed.

“If you know the reason why Lightning has taken a cooperative stance with Group One, I’d like you to tell me,” Diko said.

Ranyi leaned her elbow on the bedpost, and the bed creaked. Ranyi’s back automatically straightened. It probably looked silly to

react to the sound she'd just made herself, but Diko didn't laugh, watching Ranyi silently. Ranyi let her ponytail swish back and forth, looking at Diko, and the two of them continued to stare at each other.

Then in less than thirty seconds, Ranyi looked away and let out a breath of *phew*. "She didn't tell me."

Just that one remark had taken quite a lot of mental preparation. Diko knew Ranyi was trying to get on Lightning's good side—and she also knew it wasn't going well. Ranyi didn't really want to admit she had yet to get to the point of gaining Lightning's trust. If Ranyi hadn't thought, *Lazuline would be able to say that like it was nothing*, then she wouldn't have been able to say it. Though since it had ultimately taken time for her to say, she was a far call from Lazuline.

Diko clapped her hand against the right side of her head, where the Nue was tattooed on.

Ranyi thought Diko had managed to understand her indecisive attitude and vague remark so well, it was sad. The two of them had known each other for just that long, and they had both been candidates for the third Lapis Lazuline, so they had good instincts. Ranyi had known that when she said that.

"But I do have my own guess. I think she might be tryin' to create bad feelings between Groups One and Two. Her plans didn't really work out quite like she wanted 'em to, but Mephis and Tetty did actually get in a fight, so I guess ya can say she basically succeeded."

Diko lifted her head. Ranyi looked straight back into her dark, bluish eyes.

"Why does Lightning want a rift between Groups One and Two?" Diko asked.

"Well…I dunno. Oh, I think there's lotsa reasons. Maybe Lightning's another one like us, like someone sent her in… Actually, she prolly is. Just lookin' at her, ya can tell she's not just anyone, right?"

Diko was looking at Ranyi. Ranyi let out a breath, and her lips were so dry, it made a whistling sound.

Diko nodded expressionlessly, adjusting the height of the chair, and after lowering it, she slowly stood. "We've received orders."

"Huh? I never heard."

"I'm telling you now. They say they want us to make a map of

the school. It seems there's some location they're after, but I haven't been told the details."

The two of them gazed at each other for a while, and after a moment that felt like about half of the last time, Diko turned around and, without particularly saying good-bye, opened the door and walked out of the room. Left there on the bed, Ranyi licked her lips. They were completely dry. She felt something on her lips catch.

She wanted to be chosen as Lazuline. She knew everyone thought, *"Ranyi doesn't have what it takes."* But she wanted to become her. She wanted to *be* someone, and she believed Lazuline was that someone. She wanted confidence like Lightning, but she just couldn't get it. The more she struggled, the more it slipped through her fingers. She knew that even if she tried to behave like Lazuline and talk like her, there was no point. She knew that, but she couldn't stop.

Though they'd both been Lazuline candidates, Diko had been able to give up so easily. And their master had evaluated her positively, putting Dikko in a position where she received orders straight from her master. But even knowing that, Ranyi would not give up. If she couldn't be the third, then she'd be the fourth. If she could make this next mission a success, she was sure to get closer to that.

◇ Kana

When Kana returned to the classroom, there was nobody there. The classroom Kana knew had struck her negatively: It was always packed with a crowd of magical girls, full of noise, and too small. But when everyone was gone like this, it was too neat. It was just empty. Perhaps she was feeling something like loneliness. *My sensibilities have grown*, she thought, impressed with herself, and folding her arms, she walked around the classroom, letting the "loneliness" seep into her body—and got sick of it within ten seconds. Loneliness wasn't fun.

As she spent some time brooding about this, she heard a voice call out to her: "Hey." It was not the voice of a magical girl. Kana had faced deeply suspicious eyes that poked through the door of the classroom three times now, just that day. Whenever Kana saw this

woman, she always appeared volatile.

She was the one in charge of this magical-girl school, Halna Midi Meren. “Don’t idle about here forever. Go already.”

“Go?” Kana asked. “Where am I supposed to go?”

“Home, obviously. Don’t try to be smart with me.”

“I don’t have a home.”

The heat drained from Halna’s face. Expressionlessly, as if she’d seen nothing, heard nothing, she muttered the single remark, “I see,” then followed up with, “Well, just leave the school.” By the time Kana asked, “Where should I go after that?” Halna was already gone.

Kana raced off, dashing to the door of the teacher’s office to come out in front of Halna as she strode through the hallway. Her way suddenly blocked, the mage started, then scowled in displeasure, trying to go around Kana, and Kana slid over to block her way again.

Halna stopped right before they would have touched. “What are you doing? You can’t stay in the school forever.”

“That’s why I’m telling you I have no place to go.”

“First of all, you’re acting very disrespectful.”

“Since my origins are unknown, wouldn’t you say it’s unclear which of us is the social superior?”

“Even if you were the First Mage, right now, we’re teacher and student.”

“I see. That’s a very reasonable point. In any case, about where I should go back to…”

Halna drew back her chin, and tilting her head forward, she scratched the back of her head. Her bangs got messed up, but she ignored that, tap-tapping her right temple with her index finger. “Just go back to the Caspar Faction base or headquarters or whatnot.”

“With this sort of mission, I assume that you’re not supposed to return to base until it’s completed. And I wouldn’t know where it is in the first place,” Kana replied.

“Go back to the prison.”

“The prison isn’t my home at all. And I don’t know where that place is, either.”

“Ask whoever’s in charge.”

“I don’t know how to contact her.”

“That’s none of my concern.”

“Isn’t that irresponsible?”

“Ask Calkoro.”

“If her decision requires your permission, then I believe it would be the least amount of hassle to have you decide here and now.”

“I’m busy. I have a mountain of things to do right now.”

“Then it’d be best to make the decision quickly, wouldn’t it? How about I stay overnight at the school instead?”

“Out of the question!”

“So then. Couldn’t I stay at your house, Halna?”

Halna’s eyes widened. She wasn’t quite glaring at Kana—it would be more accurate to call that disbelief—and she blinked two, three times before shaking her head and letting out a big sigh. She smacked the back of her neck a couple of times, making her impromptu-looking tight bun and her long ears sway side to side. “What…are you?”

“I don’t know that myself,” Kana replied honestly.

“I don’t want to talk to you; I don’t want to be involved with you for even a few seconds, but as an obligation of my position, I will tell you this.”

“Thanks.”

“It would be a major scandal for a teacher and student to come to school from the same house.”

“…That’s quite true, now that you mention it.”

“If you get it, then leave.”

“Well, then I have to sleep outside.”

“Why would you sleep outside? Just stay at a hotel.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“What on earth is the Caspar Faction thinking?”

“I’d like to ask that myself.”

“Don’t sleep outside. If, by the one-in-a-million chance you caused some problem, it would hurt the school’s reputation. I can just see it. Absolutely not.”

“So then what would you have me—?”

Kana tore her gaze away from Halna, looking farther down the hallway. Halna turned to where she was looking. The sound of indoor shoes padding along the floors was gradually drawing nearer. After the girl turned the corner, they saw that the one coming toward them had glasses, braids, and a mean look in her eyes—it was Mephis Pheles. Her eyebrows came together like she

was confused to see Kana and Halna looking at her, but it seemed she couldn't question a teacher, as she just drew her lips in a line and puffed out her chest, walking with wide strides, her steps almost rude sounding.

Kana moved only her eyes to look at Halna. Halna was looking at Kana, too. Kana nodded, and Halna nodded back. Mephis looked at their exchange with confusion, but she never asked what they were doing, and despite her curiosity, she stuck to acting like it was none of her concern as she reached out to the door of the classroom, but Halna called out, "Hey," stopping her.

"What?" Mephis looked like she was in the second-worst mood Kana had seen her in yet, ranked after the time Kana had advised her about the color of her underwear.

But nevertheless, being in the position of a teacher, it seemed Halna was a rank up and so remained unflinching, ordering her from above. "It seems Kana is having trouble because she has nowhere to live. Let her stay with you."

Mephis's expression twisted in a different direction from a bad mood. Kana decided that it was a mix of surprise, anger, and incomprehension; feeling somewhat satisfied that she'd become quite a lot better at psychological evaluation, she raised her right hand and said, "Thanks."

"Are you shitting me?!" Kana was not welcome. Mephis punched the wall and leaned into Halna intimidatingly. "The fuck do you think you are? Actually, who the hell *are* you? A magical girl…? No, doesn't seem like it. You someone reincarnated from another world?"

Kana realized Mephis had said that because she was unaware of who the mage before them was. Thinking she should know, she indicated Halna with a palm and informed her, "She's the principal."

Mephis's face, which had been filled with nothing but anger, now looked like she'd swallowed a pencil.

As for Halna, her expression was unquestionably, unmistakably, filled with nothing but anger. "'Shitting, fuck, hell,' eh? That's some fine language, Mephis Pheles."

Making sounds that wouldn't become full words, Mephis backed up a step. She glanced over at Kana, but Kana had no help to give.

Halna stepped forward, closing the distance between them. She thrust a finger at Mephis's chest and said in a voice that seemed to

ring from deep in the earth, “This is an order, Mephis Pheles. Let Kana stay over at your house.”

Mephis quietly muttered, “This is tyranny,” but she was immediately drowned out by Halna. Kana didn’t know whether Halna had heard her, but Kana figured the furious principal would just speak as she pleased, regardless.

“Don’t think that something so *insignificant* as the Caspar Faction—the mere Elite Guard—will protect you, you little magical *grime*. Take *this* with you while I can still restrain myself and get out of my sight. Play nice with your classmates. Do you hear me?” Then without waiting for a reply, Halna spun around and briskly strode away.

Mephis didn’t call anything after her; in fact, she looked like she’d even stopped breathing as she watched Halna go. After the principal turned right at the T intersection that led to her office and went out of sight, Mephis finally let out a breath and dropped her shoulders. “I shouldn’t have gone to the bathroom and just gone home…”

“This is a great help to me. I appreciate it,” said Kana.

“That elf is the principal? I think I heard at the entrance ceremony that she existed, and her title, and it was like—some big cheese from the Magical Kingdom…deputy chief of the Information Bureau, was it? I hear that place is real scary.”

“Oh, really? That’s amazing.”

Mephis glared up at Kana. Her expression looked quite spiteful.

CHAPTER 6
THE SWEET TRAP

◇ **Kana**

Kana wondered how Mephis would react—would she reject her again, or leave her behind, or evade her on the way back? And so she was cautious in her own way to stick close to Mephis, no matter what. But Mephis herself just started walking without a word, so for now, Kana followed.

They went through the gate in the gym equipment room, and then Mephis took her magical-girl form. She ran up a building, jumped off an iron pole, and dashed along a cable. Kana did the same thing as she went after her. Looking back on how she really had spent that day following other people around, since she wouldn't always have someone to imitate, she quietly made up her mind that she would have to memorize how to do her work as well as the way back home. Upon self-evaluation, she thought this was a very fine decision to have made, and she privately praised herself. She really had grown as a magical girl, after all.

They went over the commercial area and its bright lights to head into the darkness. It wasn't as if Kana wasn't curious about the downtown area, but she knew from experience that it was dangerous not to keep your eyes ahead when you were running as fast as a magical girl. Depending on your speed, even a stumble might destroy an apartment or even a whole building.

So she couldn't look to the sides, and she also recalled knowing from experience that it was dangerous to let your mind wander and let your feet move on auto when you were running after someone. So she decided to stop letting her mind wander while running (even for self-evaluations or thinking back on school) and focused on following Mephis's back. When her feet came to a stop, she found

herself on the roof of a structure of a tall, oblong shape made from concrete. The whole area was filled with dense stands of inorganic oblongs—to Kana's eyes, they didn't look like just similar shapes but exactly the same shapes.

"This is… Oh, I know, a high-rise area," Kana said.

"It's an apartment complex," Mephis told her.

"An apartment complex, eh? I'll remember that."

Grumbling, "Why do you need to remember that?" Mephis pulled out a small metal object and dangled it in front of Kana's eyes to show her. Kana knew this shape. It was a key.

"I sneaked this from the building manager. I made a spare, then returned it," Mephis said, kind of like she was bragging. She used the key to open the protruding roof door, then beckoned Kana in and closed it again. It smelled moldy inside, and the ceiling and walls were a dirty black, as if they were covered in soot. The two of them went down one floor's worth of stairs to stand in front of a different door. This one was similar in that it was metal and kind of cheap looking, but it looked a little thicker and sturdier than the door on the roof. Mephis opened this door with a different key from the earlier one, and Kana silently followed Mephis inside.

When Mephis closed the door, the smell of mold faded. The entrance way here seemed to be for leaving shoes, as Mephis took her shoes off there and went inside. Kana followed after her.

It was a short, narrow hallway. Go down it, and there was a room at the end. A cloth hung in the doorway there. There was some pattern drawn on the cloth, but Kana didn't know what it meant. The cloth looked too shabby and old to be a decoration, and it was also too short to hide what was inside the room, and you could see inside. Perhaps it had some kind of religious meaning.

Passing under the cloth, Kana went into the room. There were many unfamiliar things inside. Even Kana could recognize the monitor, bed, bookshelf and books, but there were also things she had no idea as to their purpose. A bag that shone with a metallic luster was full to bursting. There was some kind of curio that was a little cylindrical metal, a square plastic case, and an iron disk connected with an iron pole, but no sooner had she wondered what it was as the next unidentified object caught her eye, and her brain couldn't keep up with it all.

"Why're you looking at all my stuff?" Mephis asked.

"Sorry. It's all so new to me, I couldn't help myself."

“Are you a burglar or what?”

“I can’t rule that out.”

“…Oh yeah, you were in prison, right?”

The mistress of the house hit a switch on the wall to turn on the lights. She sat down on the bed facing Kana and tossed a cushion at her. Inferring that Mephis meant she should sit on it on the floor, Kana set the cushion under her bottom and hugged her knees to her chest. Mephis gave her an odd look, but since she made no comment, Kana took this as an okay.

The room was small, about three times Kana’s height squared, but not so small that there was nowhere to sit. However, her initial impression that there was “a lot of stuff” seemed to be correct. Large books overflowed from the bookshelves to pile up on the floor, the top of the pile higher than Kana’s sitting height. Was Mephis actually a reader, despite appearances? But if so, she didn’t take great care with her books. Some of them had folded pages.

“All right, so then instead of paying me rent, let’s have you talk,” Mephis said.

“I can do that,” Kana replied. “I’ll tell you what I’m able. Like for example, as a way to make up with Tetty—”

“I didn’t ask that! Why do I have to make up with her?”

“Do you two have some history I’m unaware of?”

“That’s…well, stuff happened.”

“So then tell me.”

“We went to the same elementary school… Wait, no! You’re supposed to be telling me shit!”

“I’m Kana.”

“No more playing stupid, okay?” Mephis smacked the bed with her right hand, the bounce carrying her to her feet, and in a light, natural motion like down feathers drifting in the wind, she sat herself next to Kana and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Each of her long, graceful fingers stroked Kana’s chin in succession, while her sharp gray nails scraped Kana’s throat almost firmly enough to hurt. Her black hair curled around them, moving like a magical girl with a medusa motif, as she leaned close enough Kana could feel her breath with the motion of her pinkish-black lips. For some reason, the way her lips moved looked obscene, making her devil motif unquestionable.

“You knew the principal, huh?” Mephis asked.

“I only met her this morning.”

“What were you talking about just now?”

“I have no place to go back to. I was negotiating with her to see if I could stay at her house.”

Mephis thrust herself away from Kana to sit on the bed. The look she gave Kana was not one of anger or disdain. Kana thought perhaps it was something like distrust.

“That’s weird,” Mephis said. “Why would you ask someone you’ve only met this morning to let you stay at her house? And on top of that, they said at the entrance ceremony that she’s also the deputy chief of the Information Bureau, so she’s too busy to come here. I heard this from Adelheid, but the Information Bureau is a reeeal dangerous place, right? And the deputy chief is a seriously dangerous person. I mean, she had a crazy intense aura.”

“I wasn’t aware of her position until you informed me. Also, she’s not an elf, she’s a mage. Though this also depends on what you would consider an elf—”

“I’m not talking about the definition of an elf!”

“True enough.”

“You saw how she was acting, right? She was like, *‘I could destroy a puny little magical girl like you with just one finger.’* She thinks of us as trash to begin with. So how could a big-shot mage like that be seriously listening to you? Why is it that someone who rarely even shows her face is making accommodations for you? Tell me.” Mephis’s large, red-flecked dark eyes pressured her and seemed to be saying, *“Tell me now,”* and Kana realized that she’d been backed into a corner. Mephis’s words tortured her heart, and this was probably Mephis’s magic. Kana wanted to accede to her demands and talk so badly, but she had none of the information Mephis sought.

“I see,” Kana said.

“Whaddaya mean, *I see*?”

Kana understood the reason Mephis hadn’t put up much of a fight about bringing Kana home. She was suspicious about Halna’s kindness and so intended to take her home to get answers out of her, with her magic being the key here. Was she trying to remove a foreign element that disturbed the harmony of the class, or was this to gain information on the teacher and use it to make her time at school easier? With Kana’s freshly learned negotiation skills, she couldn’t determine that. What she did understand was that Mephis was convinced something was up, and that even if Kana were to

deny or evade, Mephis was unlikely to buy it.

Kana seemed to recall that someone—probably some rotten villain—had once said that when lying, the most foolish thing to do was cover everything with falsehood. But still, should she be honestly telling Mephis, *"I was ordered here by some woman I don't really understand and told to be a good student and graduate?"*

Kana agonized over it, though she didn't show it on her face, and it led her to remember something important. "I was in a prison."

"I know that." Mephis's right eye narrowed in suspicion. That must have piqued her curiosity. The fact that she showed interest in the prison rather than attacking Kana for her resistance proved that.

"Modern prisons value reformation and learning over discipline and retribution. It's not at all rare to make use of a competent prisoner, as an asset."

"Are you competent?"

"I would assume opinions are divided."

Mephis set her right leg atop her left knee and her right hand under her chin and nodded. It looked like she was thinking. She slowly closed her eyes, and then they flared open again. "Hold up. Don't you try to avoid the point, here. The prison has nothing to do with the principal."

"Just as I've told you, providing personnel from the prison is a part of the school's affairs. But of course the principal would be uneasy about a prisoner being among these students with bright futures, no matter how competent she is. They interviewed me beforehand, as well. That was when I met Halna."

"You just keep talking, and it all sounds reasonable, huh."

"I gave you an accurate explanation of my situation. Being recommended by the Bureau of Legal Affairs, you should know how important it is to be precise with your words."

"…Hmm? Hey, hold up. Why the hell do you know about who recommended me?"

The situation had taken a bad turn. Mephis narrowed her eyes, her expression dangerous as she looked at Kana. There was a mix of suspicion and anger. This was not a look you would give to one of your own from your same class, same group.

"Who did you hear that from? Tell me," Mephis demanded.

Halna had forbidden Kana to ever tell where she had gotten the information from. But not only that—if she were to honestly tell

Mephis now what she'd learned from Halna, then that would just give rise to even more doubts about Kana, since Mephis was already suspicious about Halna and Kana's relationship. Mephis tossed her right leg out, laying it on top of Kana's knees. Leaning forward, she brought her face close to Kana's, and close enough that Kana could feel her breath, she repeated, "Tell me."

Kana's heart ached. She wanted to be good and say it, and her mouth opened, but she couldn't, so she swallowed her words. Backed into a corner, she just barely restrained herself, and when she somehow managed to hold back the words, Mephis softly murmured, "Who told you?" and Kana closed her eyes.

Speaking honestly would be an act of good faith to Mephis, while not revealing the source of the information would be an act of good faith to Halna. Right now, Kana was entirely stuck between a rock and a hard place. If she showed either of them good faith, she would wind up betraying the other.

If she could be as honest as possible, while also concealing the source of her information… Could that even be done? But Kana thought—making the impossible possible was just what magical girls were all about. Perhaps this was a trial as a magical girl. If asked, *"Is acting good to both of them to continue to please everyone being a magical girl?"* it would be difficult to offer an immediate answer, but that wasn't the question she should be asking right now.

"I can't reveal the source of my information," said Kana. "I swore I wouldn't tell."

"And I'm telling you to ignore that and talk to me, got it?"

"My original motive in trying to find out everyone's patrons was to use that to make friends with everyone. But if I told you now where that information came from, I would be unable to become friends with everyone. I'd call that losing sight of my priorities. So I can't reveal the source of that information."

"I see…to be friends with everyone, huh?"

"That's right."

Mephis clapped her hands three times and smiled. "Wow."

"I didn't expect I'd be commended for that."

"This isn't a compliment! I'm saying *wow* that you think a bullshit excuse like that'll work, you piece of garbage!"

"It's not an excuse. I want to make friends with you, too. And I want to make friends with Tetty. And I think it would be best if you

two got along, too. About that fight you and Tetty had during the mock battle—"

"Drop dead!"

Mephis kicked her, and Kana rolled over to smack into the wall. The impact made the bookshelf fall over, and it caught on the chest of drawers, stuck leaning on an angle. Kana wound up flattened underneath the books that came down from the bookshelf in a flutter of paper.

◇ Lapis Lazuline

The pure-white walls and floor looked vaguely sooty—it was because of the dim lighting. The resin floor made no sounds, silencing even her footsteps. Apparently, some researchers had complained about running into people when turning corners. But Lazuline hadn't heard of that leading to talk of fixing it.

She went straight through an intersection, then turned right at the next one to pass a few doors, offering a bow and a bit of an awkward, bashful smile to the mage in a lab coat who came walking up from ahead.

Not Lapis Lazuline's smile—Bluebell Candy's smile.

Though Bluebell Candy had a chair in the Department of Research and Development, there was no chair for Lapis Lazuline. And there was no point in changing her name now so she could stick to being the character named Lazuline. There wasn't really any harm to acting as Bluebell Candy, aside from the side effect of a slightly sour mood, so when at R&D, Lapis Lazuline was still Bluebell Candy. Here, neither Lazuline's memories nor her personality were worth anything.

Before the door that was three from the end of the hall, she did a right turn and came to a stop. The plate there read REFERENCE ROOM. She knocked twice, then waited two beats, and knocked again. The door slid to the right, Lazuline slipped inside, and the door shut right after her.

"Looks like Frederica's made her move, master," said Lazuline.

"What do you mean, *looks like*?" An older woman somewhere past middle age laid her pen on the table. Most would probably describe her as "sophisticated."

Lazuline swept into the chair that was for visitors, sitting down

without any hesitation and folding her legs, facing the First Lazuline across the desk. “I mean, this is Frederica, right? Ya can’t say for sure.”

“So this is your guess, in other words?” The woman wore a leisurely smile. She spoke in a polite manner, and she was gently affable. But those who knew her would at the very least straighten their posture when seeing her, knowing that mistakes were not permitted with her. Only Lazuline faced her with a relaxed posture. She hadn’t succeeded to the name of Lazuline for nothing. It wasn’t Bluebell Candy but Lapis Lazuline who knew what the First wanted from her. At the very least, it wasn’t enough to just not make mistakes.

“An agent of the Caspar Faction’s reachin’ out to people connected to the Archfiend Cram School,” Lazuline explained. “That’s what I mean by *looks like*. Frederica isn’t doin’ stuff directly, but well, it’s probably on her request, right? It’s some pretty major goings-on. They’re recruitin’ so many, it’s a bit out of the ordinary.”

“This all sounds expensive.”

“Yeah. Of course graduates of the Archfiend Cram School are, but even dropouts have quite a lotta brand clout, after all. But if they used their subordinate antiestablishment organization or Caspar Faction girls, it wouldn’t cost them—so this means they’re up to somethin’ that requires the extra trouble of external commission. That’s a big deal.” Lazuline refolded her legs, and the First laid her elbows on the armrests, turning her chair to the right.

Lazuline narrowed her right eye and pursed her lips slightly. “Rather than makin’ the Cram School our enemy, isn’t it better to have ’em on our side? I think even startin’ now, if we get a few good people with us, we can make it work out. And I’m sure some’ll switch sides for money.”

“If Archfiend Cram School girls were to compare what I’m trying to do with what Frederica is trying to do and make a choice, they will choose Frederica’s side.”

Frederica was trying to make more magical girls. The First thought magical girls should be no more. Even if they both wanted the forces to oppose the Magical Kingdom, their goals were incompatible. They’d both know that while working together anyway, but now that Frederica had taken over the Caspar Faction, the balance between them had crumbled. But even taking that into account, Lazuline thought they should get the Archfiend Cram

School on their side.

The First, however, would not accept that idea. “It would require too much time and money to win over those members of the Cram School who are already working with Frederica. They have a strong sense of obligation. I don’t see the point in going that far.”

I knew it, Lazuline thought. The First would never say it out loud, but she loathed the Archfiend Cram School. Though more so than the school, it was that she loathed—*despised*—everything connected to Cranberry, Musician of the Forest. She wouldn’t work with the organization of which Cranberry had been a member.

“So we leave the Cram School to become our enemies while we got no plan?” Lazuline said. “Doesn’t that make us a little too defenseless?”

“No plan? No, that’s not at all the case.” The First leaned forward slightly, the wheels of her chair making a grating noise. “We have enough forces. What we need is something else. First, we need a map of the whole school. We have to figure out the place Frederica is after.”

The magical-girl class was an enterprise that had been kicked off by the Puk Faction. After seizing Puk Puck’s ruins, the Osk Faction had snatched said enterprise away from them. Since Lazuline’s people had been independently raising magical girls, they’d had no need to get involved, but then Frederica had begun proactively sending in students. So the First had reacted swiftly, and to catch up, she’d recommended apprentices or had them recommended.

“It looks like there’s a li’l somethin’ goin’ on there,” said Lazuline. “I’m sure Frederica is pullin’ lots of strings, too. Since Diko’s been put in Group Three.”

Having come in late, the First had milked her connections for all they were worth, then camouflaged her actions. Only one of hers had been recommended completely aboveboard from the R&D Department. For Diko Narakunoin, she’d gone through a third party and paid money to influential aristocrats of the Caspar Faction to buy a recommendation to the magical-girl class. For Ranyi, she’d called in a favor from the upper ranks of a public organization that wasn’t affiliated with any faction to get a recommendation slot.

She had meant to have recommended both of them through routes with no connection to the R&D Department. In particular, since Diko had been recommended by the Caspar Faction, she

should have been assigned to Group Two, in compliance with the division between factions. But despite that, all three girls had in fact been assigned to Group Three. They'd been assigned to their original allegiance, the one that had not been made public. It was like a message that told them, *"I know exactly what you guys are doing."*

"What about Snow White?" the First asked.

"She got together with Deluge."

Lazuline was relieved that she'd been able to say Deluge's name casually, as a natural part of the conversation, and she felt pathetic for having been relieved, and knowing the First would be able to tell how she felt, she sighed.

"Good. Well then, let's have Lightning make her move." The First cocked her right eyebrow just a tad.

Lazuline was aware she was the reason for that change of expression—since when Lightning's name had come up, Lazuline had made an utterly aggrieved look. Or actually, she just disliked her. Lazuline couldn't bring herself to like Princess Lightning, the magical girl who had been recommended from the R&D Department.

"What?" the First asked.

"Nothing."

"Neither you nor I are able to enter such a firmly guarded school. So of course we'd make the request from Lightning, since she's a student there."

"Well, yeah," Lazuline acknowledged. "But, like, I think we should at least tell Ranyi and Diko about our relationship with Lightning. They can't contact her, right?"

"Lightning's information is unnecessary to Ranyi and Diko's mission."

"Y'know, master, the way you're doin' this, it's like you're okay if the girls fail. Like you're makin' it so that even if they blow it when the time comes, the most important info won't get out, I mean, like ya don't trust 'em."

"I don't appreciate bringing personal preference into relationships."

I don't wanna hear that from you, Lazuline thought, and thinking that surely her master could tell what was on her mind, she mentally stuck out her tongue as cutely as she could.

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

At night, the school was quiet, lonely, and creepy. The cheapness, crudeness, and lack of restraint that could be sensed during the daytime was turned on its face to seem like an entirely different kind of place… This was the uncharacteristically poetic feeling she'd nursed in her heart only up to the second time—or just barely the third at most. After coming this many times, she'd settled on the conclusion that the facility itself was the same night and day.

Jumping from the jumbo lights for night games to run over the nets, she went from the sports oval to the pinnacle of the big clock at the front entrance, from there leaping to the roof, going from railing to railing up to the water tank. She let her cape flutter in the wind for a while, glowing with self-satisfaction as she imagined how picturesque she looked.

From trespassing on the school at night many times, she'd gotten a feel for which spots would trip the alarm to contact the security company. For Umemizaki Junior High School, it was basically fine so long as she didn't go inside. That just didn't work on the side with the old building—in other words, the side for the magical-girl class.

Adelheid approached the entrance to the old school building, stopping a couple dozen feet away to pick up a pebble about the size of her pinky nail and toss it underhand. The rock bounced lightly and rolled to a stop. The old school building, which had been dead silent until she'd thrown that rock, filled with the sound of things squirming, then stopped the moment the pebble came to a halt.

That was the security homunculi. And no ordinary number of them. Adelheid could sense the iron determination to prevent approach from intruders, no matter what. In other words, there was something there they would go to those lengths in order to protect.

Adelheid had hardly any memories of elementary school. She'd barely ever attended, so she hadn't had the opportunity to make any. Her mother was a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, and as soon as she'd learned of her daughter's talent, she'd taken her out of mandatory education and tossed her into the Archfiend Cram School. Adelheid would question a lot of things about her mother, but regardless, she was thankful she had gotten her into the Cram School.

Adelheid had learned everything there. Archfiend Pam, the senior magical girls, and her mother had taught her all sorts of things, from regular education to the systems of the Magical Kingdom to magical-girl combat methods. And one of the things she had been taught about was combat homunculi.

Homunculi evolved day by day, along with the technology. Even a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School—including the best of them—couldn't let their guard down with homunculi. This magical-girl school had only just been established, so the odds were high they had the most cutting-edge homunculi installed there. They'd be so strong as to be incomparable with the training-use ones they had fought during the day. And judging from those sounds, there were a lot, too.

As was typical for graduates of the Archfiend Cram School, Adelheid knew she could hold her own in a fight. But even she wasn't about to take another step closer to see what the homunculi looked like. People still often brought up that old story about how ten of their grads had attacked the Management Department, which had been guarded by homunculi. After an intense battle, the magical girls had all died. Adelheid didn't think for a second that she could manage alone.

"Well, not happenin'," she muttered, left hand on her waist, right hand on the hilt of her military saber as she looked up at the old school building. She was not talking to herself. "Ya think so, too, don'cha?" she said to the person who was trying to sneak up on her from behind.

The footsteps that had been trying to be stealthy stopped for a moment, then resumed their approach without reservation, crossing the dirt to stop five steps behind her. "You noticed?"

"Of course Ah did." Cape sweeping along with her wide movement, Adelheid turned around. She made it look like she was cool and calm, but her hand never left the hilt of her sword. She tugged up the visor of her military cap to look at the other person.

Drums at her back and a long sword with bolts crackling along it. It was Princess Lightning. She wore the same suggestive smile she did at school during the day, but now, it looked even more suggestive. "Not going in?" Lightning asked.

"Nah way. If ya wanna go in, Ah won't stop ya."

Lightning took a casual step forward, and Adelheid's foot pulled back, drawing a line in the earth. Her posture was slightly forward-

leaning, her hand staying open on her hilt so she could draw it at any time.

Lightning put the back of her hand to her mouth and smiled in delight. “What are you afraid of? As a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, of all people.”

“…Ya know about that?”

“You all have the same sort of ridiculous added titles; you can’t help but notice. And Thunder-General? You don’t think that’s too similar to Princess Lightning?” She took another step forward. Her manner was entirely easy, and she showed no sign of stopping. Adelheid examined her face but only found a thin smile that revealed none of her thoughts. Adelheid couldn’t figure out what she was after. She approached the reach of Adelheid’s blade, then stepped into sword range. She should understand just as well as Adelheid did that it was a very bad idea to fight here.

“I don’t think we need two storm characters in the class,” said Lightning.

“Yeah, but still. Ah can’t go changin’ mah name now.”

“It works out if *you* just get lost, doesn’t it?”

“Can’t do that.”

Adelheid had visited the school to check on the security more than once or twice. She’d prepared excuses, like she was doing patrols to make sure no suspicious people came around at night, and she hadn’t really tried to hide her presence, either. She’d been that casual about this. She wasn’t prepared to make this a big thing.

Lightning took another step closer.

Adelheid smiled at her. “Let’s stop it here.”

“Why? I’m picking a fight with you. So then you have to accept, don’t you? A graduate of the Archfiend Cram School not taking a fight when it’s offered—Archfiend Pam would be rolling in her grave.”

“Cram School people don’t take cheap fights.”

“Does it seem to you such pretenses are necessary here? That’s not what I want to hear right now—”

A lightning strike flashed, shattering the darkness and tranquility. Adelheid leaped to the right, unsheathing her blade in midair. In a sideways stance, Lightning hid her blade behind her left side, coming in five yards in a single step to thrust. Her purple-lightning sword undulated and stretched, but right before it could reach its target, Adelheid cried out, “*Kaiser Schlacht!*”

Electricity ran round Adelheid's whole body. Its intense energy pierced her from every direction, attempting to ravage her, but she caged it all inside her instead, sending it from there to her right arm and her sword to unleash it. Lightning didn't even try to dodge, spreading both arms to accept the bolts, and her whole body, even her costume drum and sword, crackled with sparks. It wasn't working. Adelheid had anticipated this could happen, but it actually looked as if Lightning was absorbing the energy.

The two magical girls leaped back as if repelled from each other, switching places. Adelheid was on the side of the sports oval, ready in a low stance, while Lightning had the old school building at her back.

Lightning's long sword was already back at her waist. As if clapping along with the sound of the sparks, she applauded. "Wow, amazing. Archfiend Cram School people really do call out their move names, huh?"

"What in the darn heck are ya thinkin'?"

"What are *you* thinking? You have an opponent right in front of you saying 'let's fight,' but you're asking what *I'm* thinking? Is that the way the Archfiend Cram School does things? Even a regular magical girl would have a little more bite."

Adelheid leaped toward the old school building. Lightning came right after her, repeatedly raining bolts down on her, charring the ground and burning the grass. At this rate, they'd attract attention soon, even if it was the middle of the night. Did Lightning know that, doing this? Had she gone crazy? Many thoughts crossed Adelheid's mind, but one of the biggest was her desire to snap back against the humiliating jab that "Even an ordinary magical girl would have a little more bite." Adelheid's time in the Archfiend Cram School had been everything to her. Her anger as a graduate of the school was starting to overcome her composure as an employee of the Department of Diplomacy.

Adelheid made it seem like she was absorbing lightning and using it to counter, while she swept her cape to obscure Lightning's vision. With a triple stab of her military saber, she sliced up the cape, and now she was the one pursuing Lightning, who was backing off as she gushed blood. Adelheid took advantage of the opening when Lightning was about to cast her own bolts, slashing her blade down and then away, and when Lightning lost her balance, Adelheid's left hand shot out, hooking her pinky around the metal fitting of her drum to yank Lightning toward her. With a groan, Lightning released the drum, and it rolled away behind her. Adelheid threw her other drum away, making for a follow-up attack; Lightning, on her knees, raised her right palm at her.

"Archfiend Cram School students really are excellent. It seems like this would be a little tough to do normally." Her shoulders

were heaving. She was bleeding, too. But she wasn't balking at more fighting, and her expression didn't say that, either.

The toe of Adelheid's army boot sounded out as she took a step forward, and Lightning touched the large gem in her left hand to her forehead. The gem burst and disappeared, and a yellow color like lightning bolts made her whole tiara shine.

"Luxury Mode: On."

Lightning's blade met Adelheid's slice. Her strike should have been a swing of desperation, but it felt abnormally heavy. Adelheid just about dropped her sword, but she supported the hilt in both hands to cut upward, slicing vertically in continuous succession toward the center line of her body. Lightning blocked every one with her own sword, and when Adelheid came with a final powerful blow from above, she crossed her dagger and sword to block it easily, then smoothly shifted into a kick. Right before that hit, Adelheid leaped backward and rolled, turning her back to the enemy to stand.

"Siegfried Linie!"

Lightning strikes rained down on her back. One strike, two, but Adelheid still didn't fall. She stored up the energy inside herself and made her military saber shine. For just an instant, the bloodthirsty aura swelled. Lightning thrust her sword in, and Adelheid blocked even that with her back, repelling it. Whipping around, Adelheid leaped away—just a few inches apart, her eyes met with Lightning's as she saw her expression twisted in shock.

Adelheid released the energy inside her as she accelerated her spin, striking the enemy's temple with her saber hilt. They were too close, and she was in an unstable position in midair, and striking while tangled up like this wouldn't normally have hit very hard, but Adelheid put the energy of her magic in it. Even if the lightning strikes wouldn't work on her, the physical element would be effective.

Lightning was flung away, bouncing off the ground to be swallowed by the thicket on the edge of the sports oval, scattering leaves and branches and making the net sway. Adelheid dropped her hands to her knees and let out a deep breath.

If Lightning had kept her distance and stuck to electrical attacks, Adelheid would have reached her limit before long. Adelheid had only been able to win because Lightning had gotten impatient and come for a direct attack when Adelheid had shown

her back.

"Wait…what in the heck was that?" Adelheid muttered.

Lightning had been using combat techniques she'd trained in, not just relying entirely on raw power. The way she'd suddenly grown stronger when she'd touched the gem to her forehead—was that some kind of enhancement magic? Adelheid didn't even understand why Lightning had picked a fight with her in the first place. There was no benefit to it for either of them.

All right, she thought, patting her knees to straighten up. Her opponent was a magical girl and a pretty tough one, too. But still, Adelheid had struck a vital spot at full power. It was very possible she'd killed her. At the very least, she'd be passed out.

Thinking that she'd snatch Lightning away and beat a swift retreat before rubberneckers started showing up, Adelheid ran into the thicket—but then within three steps, she froze.

A figure stood in the thicket. "So you can absorb physical attacks, too, hmm?"

It was Lightning.

Adelheid just about backed away but then stopped, readying herself.

Lightning was smiling. Her drums were on her back. She wasn't bleeding. Her temple was still clean. Even if Adelheid would, for the sake of argument, accept that she hadn't passed out, how the heck had her wounds healed?

As Adelheid was hesitating, wondering whether she should attack or not, Lightning jumped away to stand atop one of the poles supporting the net. "Then see you tomorrow. At school."

With that same old suggestive smile, she leaped off. She was swallowed by the darkness of night, then disappeared. Stunned, Adelheid watched her go. From start to finish, none of this had made any sense.

◇ Ranyi

Going from a cement block wall to a telephone pole, and then from the top of the telephone pole onto a roof, then from roof to roof, she raced along. She was heading for the school. Using a gate would leave a record with the management, so she used her feet instead. With a magical girl's legs—and in particular Ranyi's as a Lazuline

candidate—she'd get there in half an hour.

Just purely when it came to long-distance running, Ranyi was slightly faster than Diko, who was running alongside her. But their two-man cell had been the standard since they'd started at this school, so she couldn't race at her top speed and leave Diko behind.

She'd never asked what Diko thought about that. If you just let Diko be, she'd never open her mouth, so Ranyi felt like she'd be losing if she spoke first. Neither of the magical girls talked as they ran onward, and before long, the school came into view. Trespassing onto the school grounds from the forested mountain in the rear, they wove between the trees to make their way. As they ran along barely serviced animal trails, Ranyi gradually slowed her pace, circling the outer circumference of the school grounds to head to the old school building and check up on it from the back entrance.

She keenly sensed something here. Being able to detect the presence of hidden things was the special skill of a Lazuline. And this wasn't anything so casual as just ten or twenty. The security at night was even tighter than during the day. Circling clockwise from the back entrance, Ranyi headed for the front. The presence of homunculi never faded.

It seemed that all she was getting out of this was the confirmation stamp on her assumption that forcing her way in was impossible. And there was no point in making a diagram of just what could be seen here. She had to enter a place she couldn't get into, but she couldn't figure out how.

No, that's not it, she thought, shaking her head. It wasn't like she'd never be able to think of a way. It was just that she hadn't come up with an idea yet. She'd wring an idea out somehow, even if she had to put a cement roller to her head. If there were no openings, then a way to pry it open.

There was a tap on the back of her hand, and Ranyi stopped. Diko must have come to her side without her realizing, as she had her right hand spread, blocking the way ahead. Their eyes met. The two magical girls both dropped to the ground, soundlessly moving from shadow to shadow, and once they were in a position to see the sports oval, they stopped.

From behind the school building, Ranyi and Diko observed the sports grounds. Two magical girls were in an intense fight. This was no sparring or mock battle. They were trying to kill each other.

Adelheid and Lightning—why were they fighting here? Ranyi couldn't understand it. It was right in front of the school. They weren't single-celled organisms like Mephis, who'd lose even her ability to calculate if something would benefit her at all. Was there some kind of bad blood between them, or had they agreed to a duel?

They were both strong. They didn't move like amateurs. They'd been trained for lethal combat. Lightning struck Adelheid, and Ranyi clenched her fists.

"Siegfried Linie!"

Adelheid stopped the blow with her back. Feeling a hand grabbing her shoulder, Ranyi scowled and glared at Diko. Still expressionless, Diko shook her head, and Ranyi realized that she'd been about to run toward them.

Her eyes snapped back to the sports oval. Lightning was tossed away, scattering earth as she bounced, then plunged into the thicket. It looked like that strike might even have killed her. If Diko hadn't been holding Ranyi back, maybe Ranyi could have stopped it. But she understood painfully well the reason Diko had kept her from doing so. Right now, exposure would only hurt them.

Adelheid approached the thicket she'd knocked Lightning into. Ranyi clenched the right side of her jaw. Diko's arms were strong as a vise around Ranyi's shoulders.

What to do. What should she do? She shouldn't reveal herself. She knew that. But if she did nothing, Lightning would be finished off. The only reason to save her was just that they were "members of the same group," and Ranyi was aware that was no good reason to save her. What would Lazuline do? Would she live for friendship and stop her, knowing it would be her loss, or would she coldly cast away her friend's life to make the mission her greatest priority?

She couldn't. She couldn't abandon her. Ranyi was about to ignore Diko's attempts to restrain her and take a step forward, when at that very moment, Lightning got up. With the branches and leaves of the thicket fluttering down around her and a calm and collected attitude, she said farewell to Adelheid and gallantly strode off. Adelheid stood there for a while, watching her go, then dashed off in the other direction.

With the sounds of people gathering and police sirens at their backs, Ranyi and Diko raced back down the way they'd come. Ranyi was confused but worked up, too. She could have sworn Lightning

had been so badly injured you couldn't even be sure if she'd survived, but then she'd gotten up afterward without a single wound. Had she used some external magical item, or had she used some trick Ranyi couldn't even think of?

"I'll let you handle the report," Diko said, and Ranyi was drawn back to reality.

Diko dispassionately stated only what was necessary, blank-faced as usual. She offered no opinions about the miracle they'd witnessed. It was like she'd simply seen what was there. Ranyi kind of felt like she'd been doused with ice water, and she didn't reply.

She didn't need to be told. She'd submit a precise report. Lazuline wouldn't get overexcited over a miracle or two. Even if she wanted to ask Lightning just what the hell had happened, and how and why, she could suck it up.

But seriously, what happened there? While running, Ranyi licked her lips.

CHAPTER 7
HEART VS. HEART

◇ **Kumi-Kumi**

She'd gotten word from Mephis that the previous night had been a "disaster." She said the principal had ordered her to take the transfer student to stay at her home. So first, Kumi-Kumi sent a report to the Elite Guard headquarters on what Mephis told her. She also notified Lillian, but all she got out of her was "Ahhh" and "Uh-huh," which, like usual, could mean anything. Kumi-Kumi sighed. This was quite a big deal. It really wasn't worth telling her things.

And then the next day, when Kumi-Kumi saw Adelheid at school, she told her about Mephis, but Adelheid didn't really react. Kumi-Kumi asked her if something had happened, and Adelheid told her something even more incredible. She said that the night before at the school, Lightning had attacked her, and they'd had a real fight.

Before homeroom started, the members of Group Two went behind the gym to sit on the stairs, lean against the wall, or squat on the ground to have an emergency meeting. Being in a place like this in poses like this, they were just like delinquents. Maybe it wasn't her imagination that Mephis looked kind of chipper.

"Where's the transfer student?" Kumi-Kumi asked Mephis.

"I sent her to the classroom ahead of us. I told her I'd give her a pencil and notebook if she was good, so it should basically be fine. And if it's not fine, then we'll figure it out somehow, in its own not-fine sorta way."

They were all in magical-girl form, and Lillian had knit an impromptu set of clappers and yarn, stringing them up around the area so they could detect any approach. *I wish Lillian would be this sensible when she's in human form*, Kumi-Kumi thought as she leaned

her pickax against the wall of the gym, took off her hat, and placed it on top. Noticing that Adelheid did not part with her hat, saber, or cape, just casually leaning against the wall as is, Kumi-Kumi thought, *Oh, Archfiend Cram School people act like they're always on the battlefield*, and felt ashamed of herself for having let go of her pickax, even if it was still within arm's reach. But picking it up again would be even more embarrassing, so she left it there, and the four magical girls began their discussion.

"That's so badass, Adelheid!"

"Mephis, you're being…too loud," said Kumi-Kumi.

"What was so badass? Ah'm tellin' ya, it was just bad."

"When you say bad, though…" Bringing the index fingers of both her hands and even the tail in her hair into it, Mephis pointed at Adelheid.

The one being pointed at, however, muttered, "What…?" like she was uncomfortable.

"It's the sort of bad that comes with fun, right?" Mephis continued. "It wasn't actually just bad, right?"

"There's nothin' *fun* about fightin' for your life. And when ya don't even know why yer gettin' attacked, it's just scary. What in the heck was that gal thinkin'?"

"Scared of battle! This doesn't sound like something someone from the famous Archfiend Cram School would say!"

Kumi-Kumi repeated herself. "Mephis, you're…being too loud."

"Meanwhile," Mephis went on, "I just spent all night questioning that girl on and on and on and on, and the little shit wouldn't talk at all. It's like, I don't even know if my magic was working or not, fuck. It didn't seem like she'd done any manga-esque shit like special torture-resistance training or whatever, and by halfway through the night, I was sure this would never work, but I had to do it, right? If I was like, *I didn't think it was gonna work so I quit*, then obviously Kumi-Kumi and you guys would be on my ass. That shit isn't fun, and it's pointless, too, and *that's* what you call a bad time. You're just playing it up to be rough while you actually got to vent some steam from a nice hard fight, right?"

"So basically, you're jealous?" asked Lillian.

"I *am* jealous! Give me a chance to fight, too!"

"Ah'm sure there's chances lyin' around all over the place. If ya'd come round the school last night, maybe you'd have gotten yerself in a tussle." Adelheid rarely ever looked serious, but now

she did, which made even Mephis shut her mouth.

Taking advantage of that pause, Lillian picked up the conversation with “So then.” The way she timed that was so perfect, it made Kumi-Kumi think, *I wish she would stay in magical-girl form all the time*, as she listened.

“Why did you come to the school last night in the first place?” asked Lillian.

“Ah’m a magical girl, so Ah gotta do rounds on mah territory at least, right?”

“This is your territory?” Mephis cut in.

“It’s also mah territory.”

“So then don’t let intruders get away! Shit, this pisses me off, you getting to act all big when you got your ass kicked by Lightning.”

“We avoid fights…as much as possible,” said Kumi-Kumi.

“Loooser!”

“If we’re talkin’ ’bout fights, then ya gotta watch out, too, Mephis. Ya hit Tetty yesterday and ruined rec time, didn’t ya? That’s clearly goin’ too far. Ah’m sure she didn’t mean nothin’ by it, neither. And like, just recently I heard y’all have some history? It’s kinda been on mah mind.”

“I heard that…they went to…the same elementary school…and became magical girls…together.”

“Ah, that right?” said Adelheid. “Huh, so they’re childhood friends.”

“Shaddap! Stop blabbing about pointless shit! We’re talking about Lightning! Fuck off!”

Adelheid was about to argue further when Kumi-Kumi restrained her with a look and gave Lillian a nod. If they were going to talk about the bad relationship between Tetty and Mephis, they should do it when Mephis wasn’t around.

It seemed Lillian picked up on her sign, and she smoothly moved the conversation on. “Lightning was all right in the end, though, wasn’t she?”

“Ah dunno why, though. After Ah gave ’er that big thwack in the temple, Ah thought, awww darn, Ah mighta gone and done ’er in, but she was all fine and dandy and hopped off home.”

“It’s not that she actually avoided the attack or blocked it with energy or something, right?” Mephis asked.

“Nah way. Ah saw that dent in ’er temple. She was down the

road to bein' unconscious till mornin', at best."

"Dent in her temple…," Mephis repeated. "What were you gonna do if she died for real?"

"Well, Ah'd leave dealin' with that to y'all. Yer used to that, right?"

"You think the Elite Guard's work includes body disposal, moron?!"

"Well, that aside, Ah think she used some kind o' magic."

"Lightning's magic… Oh yes," said Lillian. "Electric shocks, was it?"

"That's right."

"Just based on common sense," Lillian continued, "it wouldn't be possible to heal bruises with electricity, would it?"

"Well, no."

"So then…in other words…" Kumi-Kumi hadn't at all been participating in the rapid-fire exchange of conversation, but that was precisely why she'd had the time to slowly and carefully consider, and so she'd been able to guess the reason for the mysterious phenomenon that was Lightning's lack of injury. But though she'd been able to think about it, she still couldn't speak about it very eloquently, so the words came out slow. "Doesn't that mean…Lightning's magic…is actually something else?"

"Uh, but she really was shootin' lightnin' bolts all over the place," said Adelheid.

"Well…um…that's, you know…"

"Oh, I see. True, if the electricity was borrowed from a magical item, while her own magic was something else, then there would be no contradiction." Lillian clapped her hands.

Adelheid and Mephis looked surprised but also convinced. Mephis clapped Kumi-Kumi on the back, smiling as she said, "Not bad, Kumi-Kumi," while Adelheid nodded and muttered, "True, then everythin' would fit." Kumi-Kumi hadn't been thinking as far as that, but she nodded with an expression like she'd been thinking that all along.

"Ah hear underreportin' yer magic, or falsely reportin' it, has been common since way back," said Adelheid.

"For real?" said Mephis. "You can do that?"

"Oh, but the pre-enrollment checks here are supposed ta be pretty strict. So Ah'm sure they're properly investigatin', so any liars'd get booted right away… Ah assumed anyway."

“But it’s also possible that they did investigate her but let her in regardless to watch her behavior,” Lillian pointed out.

“For real? They’d go that far?”

One of the group folded her arms and nodded, another looked up into the air instead, another groaned, while another—Kumi-Kumi—blew a long breath out her nose. She had too many things to think about. “If that’s…the principal’s…stance…then that makes it, um…possible there are…actually students…who are hiding their magic…um… That’s not good.”

“If we can’t trust any of the info that comes out public, that’s pretty brutal.”

“Will Lightning be coming to school?” asked Lillian.

“Ah think she’ll come. Cool as a cucumber.”

Mephis scowled. “I can just imagine her showing up with a look on her face like *‘Oh, did something happen?’* That bitch.”

Around the time morning training would be wrapping up, the four detransformed and went back to the classroom. Lightning, who was in the hallway whispering about something, looked even more cool and composed than Kumi-Kumi had anticipated, wearing a breezy smile.

◇ Pshuke Prains

Hearing the shocking news from the leader of Group Three, Princess Lightning, that she’d fought with Adelheid at the school late the night before, Pshuke felt more confused than angry. She thought there had to be some kind of reason, but the one in question—Lightning—was smiling without any shame at all.

“Adelheid hides what she can really do while at school, doesn’t she?” said Lightning. “Even during rec times, she never uses her magic at all. So I thought I’d like to test some things, if I had the chance. Of course, I never had any intention of doing anything reckless. But she became so worked up, you know. Two magical girls at the school at night is such a dramatic situation, after all, so what can you do? I really rather wouldn’t have, but I let her have a battle. Though of course I knew it wasn’t good to fight.”

Her little speech made Pshuke doubt her sanity. What exactly had she planned to do if she’d killed Adelheid or if Adelheid had killed her? Ranyi’s and Diko’s mouths remained closed and were

not moving. Pshuke couldn't expect either of them to tell her off anyway.

Pshuke glanced over at Sally, who looked bewildered but still kept a proper smile on her face as she asked, "So then…you mean your scheme got found out by Group Two, so you wound up in a fight, yeahhh?"

"Whatever do you mean, scheme?" asked Lightning.

"Your scheme was like, that thing, yeahhh. How in the mock battle yesterday, you offered to join forces with Group One and lent them your dagger."

"And here I was wondering why you were bringing up schematics… If that's what you mean, it doesn't seem it's been exposed. And now that you mention it, they haven't returned that weapon I lent them. If I'd had that dagger, perhaps I would have been able to win the fight last night."

"Uh, that's not the problem, here…," said Pshuke.

"I would have liked to discuss it with you, if I could have—saying, *'It's looking like there will be a fight, what should I do?'* But there was no time, was there? So I was forced into telling you after the fact. I'm sorry."

With Lightning right in front of her apologizing with that angelic smile, even knowing she had no sincere desire to apologize, Pshuke was unable to press further, and she just wound up grumbling and griping like always. And Sally, who was far better with words than Pshuke was, couldn't come down hard on Lightning, either, only cautioning her with a "watch out next time," while Ranyi in particular was looking at Lightning like she was great or heroic for acting like a loose cannon and pulling this stunt without talking to any of them about it first. And Diko was just there and nothing else. You couldn't tell from her expression whether she thought well or poorly of Lightning.

"I did unfortunately lose," Lightning continued, "but I was able to see some of my opponent's magic. I think the next time we ever have a mock battle, we can work things to our advantage. Next time, we'll be able to slap away Group Two easily without doing something as tiresome as cooperating with Group One."

If you were to personify the word "shameless," it would surely be Lightning right now. It wasn't just that she didn't think she was at fault—even when she said crazy things, it sounded mysteriously convincing. Blame it all on her face for being too flawless. No

matter what sort of idiocy she spouted, that made it seem as if she was right.

The most free-spirited girl in the class: Princess Lightning. Watching her made Pshuke remember a certain magical girl—the leader of the Puk Faction, Puk Puck. It was that simple innocence and free spirit of hers that had eventually led to her losing her life. After her death, the aristocrats of the Puk Faction who had kept their distance from her had taken control of the faction, and even after every Puk Faction member had been driven out from the magical-girl school, the faction had just barely managed to shove in one student. Pshuke had been told that anyone who was originally from the faction would make the people at the school wary, which was why they had gone to the trouble to pay a freelancer to be a student for two years.

Pshuke had wound up as the only one from the Puk Faction left in the class, and just being there was like walking on a tightrope. Since this would restrict her activity for two years, it paid quite a lot. If she failed, she would receive only the advance and wouldn't get the rest, and it would also hurt her reputation. No way did she want to get dragged into Lightning's freewheeling behavior and get expelled before it was done.

At least don't drag me into it, Pshuke griped inwardly and moaned under her breath, but she had no idea how much anyone actually heard. Sally looked the most apologetic of the group, for some reason, so you knew it was hopeless.

And so Pshuke continued to vent anger that would never reach its target, and their morning meeting came to an end. Group Three all filed into the classroom, and right as they were about to wait for Calkoro, someone called out to them. Wondering who it was, Pshuke looked over to see Tetty Goodgripp. *Friend or foe, it's gonna be nothing but miserable bastards this morning*, Pshuke thought, getting even more irritated as she rattled off the filthiest insults toward Tetty in a voice nobody would hear.

Everything had been so boring when Pshuke was in elementary school. The only fun times had been when she'd gotten into animated conversation with her friends trash-talking other people. Giving in to the urge, speaking badly of someone who didn't show their face in various communities, venting her resentments, building a sense of unity, and then saying farewell with a smile—it had taken no time for her to realize that she liked that sort of thing,

and she'd come to start it of her own accord.

But things never went that easy in life, and communities will have loose connections with other communities, and the nasty things she'd been saying about classmates got leaked to another class through the neighborhood association, and after more stuff happened, it was exposed that she liked talking badly about people behind their backs, and the friends who had been so enthusiastic about backbiting with her all did a one-eighty, and she'd wound up completely alone.

Pshuke, who had already been a magical girl at the time, had engaged in some self-reflection. She'd tried various things, like using the Internet or writing a diary and whatnot, and in the end, she'd settled on talking to herself. Communication was ultimately just incidental. The important thing was saying things out loud to vent stress. Spewing venom was like ejecting toxins from the body.

Tetty, who surely wouldn't imagine Pshuke was saying all sorts of nasty filth about her, held out that dagger to Lightning with her usual harmless-looking smile. "Since I forgot to return it yesterday."

Time had practically stopped—the classroom had gone silent. It wasn't just Groups One and Three. Group Two was right there—and Mephis. What Tetty was doing—as if she'd forgotten the very important rule of secretly returning what had been secretly obtained—gathered all the eyes and ears of the classroom, and there was no covering it up now. At the very least, Mephis was looking at them with suspicion.

Wondering about Group One, Pshuke looked over there to see Miss Ril had a worried expression, Arlie and Dory were looking all around anxiously, while Rappy had an *"Oh, she's done it now"* expression with a hand on her forehead. It seemed what Tetty was pulling was not their idea.

Pshuke fretted in a panic, but Lightning was calm and cool as if this was nothing at all, accepting the dagger with a smile as she said, "Thank you very much." Even if the day came when a meteorite fell and the world was destroyed, this abnormally attractive girl would never waver in her attitude, Pshuke thought, and she scowled in irritation.

Tetty bowed her head to Lightning, then next turned back to Mephis, bowing again. The one she was apologizing and saying "I'm sorry" to gazed down at Tetty's head, confused.

No way, she's not going to blurt it out to her, Pshuke thought,

watching the exchange between the pair with trepidation, and when she heard Tetty continue with, “About yesterday,” she muttered insults at her under her breath.

“Miss Ril was glowing at the end of the mock battle, right? Well, that was since we borrowed that dagger from Lightning, and Miss Ril used her magic to absorb the property of the dagger to shine.”

She’d gone and said it. Pshuke didn’t get why she had to say it to Mephis personally. And unlike Lightning, Tetty was not acting shamelessly about it, her hands trembling slightly. If that wasn’t acting, then it was the reaction of someone who was scared of retaliation from Mephis.

Mephis seemed to consider a moment. But then she stuck up the middle finger of her right hand like a vulgar hand sign to push up the bridge of her glasses and fix their position. Her expression was entirely calm, but that seemed like nothing other than an omen. “… In other words, it’s like, Groups One and Three got together to take out Group Two?”

“We thought…it would be advantageous to do that,” said Tetty.

“Oh. Huh. You came up with a good idea there, uh-huh.” Mephis laughed *ha-ha-ha*, and then before you could even blink, her expression transformed into a visage of rage as she made to attack Tetty, but Kumi-Kumi stopped her right arm, Lillian restrained her left, and Adelheid got her in a full nelson from behind.

Kana quietly stepped up behind Kumi-Kumi. “What should I do?”

“Grab…her legs, too.”

“Understood.” She hugged Mephis’s right leg to her chest.

Following Kumi-Kumi’s signal of “One, two,” Mephis’s four captors backed her up, drawing her away from Tetty. Kana, however, was the only one getting kicked in the face over and over with Mephis’s left leg. Her expression never changed. Pshuke really had no idea what this one was thinking, either, in a different sort of way.

Even as she was being dragged away, Mephis mustered all her strength to sling insults. Along with the childish ones of “garbage, shithead, coward, trash,” she went as far as saying, “You’ve always been like—” and Kumi-Kumi covered her mouth so she could only make muffled noises that weren’t words.

Tetty, who had caused this situation, trembled as she watched

Mephis. Miss Ril put a hand on her shoulder while Rappy tugged at her sleeve, but Tetty did not obey, taking a step forward toward Mephis and calling out loudly, “Mephis. Listen, um, you did teach me one thing, yesterday.”

Once again, the classroom went quiet. Mephis stopped struggling, and the girls who were restraining her also looked toward Tetty with opening mouths. Group Three had the same looks on their faces. Though they seemed skeptical about what she was going to say, they were listening closely so as not to miss a word.

Then there was a rattle, and the door opened. The sound of the class list being struck twice, followed by the teacher’s voice saying, “Didn’t you all hear the bell?” rang through the classroom. As if time had unfrozen, the girls got moving again, sitting down in their own seats. Calkoro looked at them with curiosity, but she must have decided not to worry about it, as she nodded once and then began taking attendance.

◇ Calkoro

Seeing the Group Two leader and all the members of her group come together to restrain her, Calkoro inferred that something had happened before class. And not just that—the whole class had a strange atmosphere. They weren’t all staring at Mephis, who was like a captured alien, but at Tetty Goodgripp. She must have said something, but it seemed Calkoro had come into the classroom too late, so she hadn’t heard what.

Calkoro would have assumed that if anyone would start an uproar, it would be Kana, or Mephis, or Kana and Mephis together. But had it actually been Tetty? Calkoro’s impression that Tetty would never proactively cause a problem—that she was in fact the type to try to put a lid on things—still had not changed. Tetty hadn’t deliberately caused that kerfuffle during the mock battle, either. She’d just acted without thinking out of goodwill, her body moving in an attempt to save Mephis.

If Tetty was causing a problem of her own initiative, then it wouldn’t be her own decision—what if the Information Bureau she worked for was making her do it? With that thought, the blackboard chalk in Calkoro’s hand froze for a moment, and she

held her right arm with her left hand, restraining it before it started shaking. If the Information Bureau was using Tetty to do something, then Calkoro shouldn't get involved.

"…Bella Lace gathered resentments from dead bodies, materialized it, and would lock magical girls inside. This might come up on the test, so please remember it." Calkoro said something she wouldn't normally say, rapping her knuckles on the blackboard while she was at it to hide her bewilderment and fear.

If the Information Bureau had made Tetty do it, then it would be strange to report this to Halna, but if she failed to report it, not doing so was bound to be taken as negligence in her supervision. If Calkoro could make it feel like she was subtly sliding it in with other items to report, that would reduce the odds that she would touch on it in an impolitic manner. And first, she should come up with every countermeasure she could before dealing with the report.

"Miss Box, who was a skilled boxer, also avariciously absorbed techniques from those of her henchmen magical girls who were skilled in martial arts—such as Bottlecut Girl, who practiced traditional karate. Cranberry was uninterested in anything aside from making herself more powerful, and the goal of the exams she held was also…"

Calkoro's eye happened to stop on the expressionless Kana. Calkoro cleared her throat and wiped the blackboard with the brush to cover it. Rushing it, she scattered chalk dust around, making her cough for real.

Slacking off again today? she wondered, eyeing Kana again to see that surprisingly, her notebook was open in front of her and her pencil was moving. Though Kumi-Kumi had her textbook shifted over to share with her, it seemed Kana had brought the rest herself.

Did she plan to take the class basically seriously? So then when she'd handed in that blank sheet the day before, had she done it to mean something?

"Cranberry perverted what magical-girl activities originally were supposed to be about: helping people on the ground level, and the result was—"

That was it. A field exercise. They couldn't have one that day, but Calkoro could make one happen somehow within the week. Kana not having shown her real abilities in the mock battle would be a reason to have her do a field exercise. Calkoro would mostly

follow around Group Two and keep a watch on Kana, checking on her activity. For the other groups, well, she'd have them do whatever and get them to report later, and that should be plenty.

As she was feeling excited about having come up with a good idea, the class came to an end, and Calkoro immediately put together a report and sent the e-mail, and frighteningly, she got an instant reply.

Calkoro reread the reply from Halna three times over.

Her instructions were nothing so gentle as having them help people around town—she said they should do combat training in a space larger than the gym. And since Kana herself had said she'd learned all of the homunculi's weaknesses, this time for sure, Calkoro should be able to make her fight properly and keep her from hiding anything. Which, now that she mentioned it, was quite right, but was Halna taking the dangers into consideration?

As for location, Halna said the mountain area behind the school was appropriate. There were no people around there, which was good, but it was so close to the middle of town.

Calkoro couldn't help but think that too many of the class safety considerations were being left up to the discretion of the teacher. And she really got the feeling that, in her attempt to avoid trouble, she'd dug up more of it.

Hold the exercise tomorrow. Get it ready immediately.

Once she had read those last two lines, Calkoro looked up at the ceiling.

◇ **Kana**

She had safely gotten through the full day's schedule. That day, she had not been under inquiry by Calkoro or reprimanded by Halna: the first day that had ended safely in the true sense of the word. Mephis and Tetty had quarreled a bit, but that was ultimately just in the morning. It didn't drag on after that, and there had been no other chances for the two of them to talk or to fight like the day before.

Though Kana didn't show it on her face, she felt great joy in her heart. With the foresight to borrow not only a pencil and eraser, but

being canny and getting even a pencil sharpener as well, she'd been able to copy off the blackboard the whole day, like the other students. And neither could it be overlooked how she had been able to submit her assignment. Calkoro had to be satisfied. When there was something Kana didn't know, she made sure to ask about it, and she never missed any instructions. If she became distracted by things or got lost in thought for a bit, then everything would be ruined. Not just for Kana. She would cause trouble for her group, the whole class, and bring danger to them. With a consideration that was even too much, her life at school was coming into being.

The teacher said there would be a nighttime field exercise the following day. Kana wrote that down in her notebook, including the warning not to forget to leave that time open. Now even if it slipped her mind, there wouldn't be a problem if she saw that reminder.

Already, she was no longer a transfer student—she'd managed to fully fit in as a member of the class. Feeling satisfied, Kana once again went home with Mephis.

And so it had been a very substantial day, but on the way back, Mephis did not open her mouth, sullenly falling silent. Examining her expression, Kana noted she clearly seemed to be in a bad mood. Kana wondered if she had some kind of personal problem and thought maybe she should offer advice, and the fact that she had enough leisure to be capable of that thought now deepened her private sense of satisfaction.

"Ahhh, shit!"

The moment they got back, Mephis detransformed. It took Kana about three claps worth of time to realize she had done so. Having her classmate suddenly appear in front of her was quite startling. The day before, Mephis hadn't detransformed between leaving school and going to school, so Kana had sort of assumed that was how it went. But as Kana was considering how to deal with this, the girl went down the hallway to the room at the end, and by the time she came back, she'd changed into a simple undershirt, with steam rising from her head. Not because she was angry. She'd probably gone to have a bath.

Mephis's hair was now down, and she dried it with a hair dryer, put her glasses in a case, and placed them by her pillow. She lay down on her bed, pulled the blanket up to her shoulders, turned her back to Kana, and turned off her room lights with a remote.

Kana shook her through the blanket. "Wait."

“Shut up! Goddamn it!” The girl tossed up the blanket, left the bed with determination, smacked her fist on the light switch to turn it on, then came back in the same way, throwing up dust as she plopped down on the bed. From the way she got angry—yes indeed, though her clothing was different, she was very much the same old Mephis.

“Nighttime’s for sleeping, okay! Moron!” Mephis said.

“But isn’t right now evening, not night?” Kana asked.

“Let me sleep.”

“We talked all night and didn’t sleep yesterday.”

“You’re boring me!”

Kana thought she probably knew quite better than anyone else that she was boring, but what point could there be in having it explicitly pointed out? She gave it some consideration but couldn’t figure out what Mephis was trying to say. Despite her remarkable growth lately, she was feeling her limits now. The satisfaction that had been continuously building all day wilted away. This wasn’t good.

“I’d appreciate if you could educate me on what about me is boring—and how,” said Kana.

“I interrogated you all day yesterday, and you didn’t talk!”

“So that was an interrogation?”

“Fugginshihmancuttabitchaghhhh!”

“I’d also appreciate if you avoided untranslatable slang.”

“Spending all night long poking and prodding and interrogating you like a mage—is not what I want to do, okay?! I’m just—not cut out for it! Do you get that?!”

“I think your magic is precisely suited to interrogation, though.”

“Like I said! It’s boring! Even after I hit you with my magic all night, you didn’t tell me anything! Nobody’s ever been able to resist it that hard, okay! And then the next day, you were just calmly going through class! But I had to work without any sleep, and I’m sick of it! The hell! Did you get some kinda training for this?! Are you a spy or something?!”

“Don’t these sorts of tasks become more effective through repetition?”

“That! Is! What! I’m calling boring! What the hell sort of point is there in interrogating someone who’s telling me I should do it again?! Fuck off! Fuck off! Just drop dead!” Since she was punching

the futon on every syllable, dust was flying up to fill the room.

Kana backed up slightly and touched the cushion she'd been sitting on the day before. *Lucky*, she thought and picked it up and put it under her bottom like she had yesterday. The carpet in this room had short hairs, so it was uncomfortable to sit without a cushion.

"You! You're a death-row prisoner, aren't you?!" Mephis said.

"I'm not from death row," Kana informed her.

"You're a jailbreaker!"

"I didn't escape from prison."

"You're some nasty hardcore prisoner, right!"

"Shouldn't we start by confirming how each of us would define 'nasty hardcore'?"

"Cut the constant back talk! You trying to make fun of me or what?! Just listen up! Seriously!"

"I'll listen seriously."

"Look, okay, you're a prisoner, right? Listen, I had my hopes up, there. You'd expect that you've got to be interesting, right? Anyone would think that—not just me."

Kana didn't understand. Aside from some exceptions, prisoners were shut away because they had gotten their hands dirty with criminal activity, and so a student who attended a school to become a full-fledged magical girl should fear them or hold them in contempt. But for some reason, Mephis was expecting her to be interesting. "How exactly did you want me to be interesting?" Kana asked.

"With fight scenes, obviously," said Mephis. "Of course you wouldn't expect anything else from an evil magical girl from prison."

"Fight scenes." What Kana managed to realize was that it would be difficult to understand just what the "interesting" Mephis described was. Kana did have the feeling that she'd managed to grasp what she should do to satisfy Mephis, if only vaguely. However, granting Mephis's wish would generate different types of obstructions for Kana. And if it would greatly burden the other classmates and damage all of Class 2-F, then wouldn't that drive Mephis to dislike her in the end? What Mephis proposed would, after all was said and done, wind up wringing her own neck.

"Wouldn't that be disadvantageous to more people?" said Kana.

"If it wasn't too brutal, then I'd go out and kick ass, so it'd be

fine. And if that happens, I can vent some stress, too, so it'll be killing two birds with one stone."

"…Would it be? I'm not so sure it would."

"Aghhh! Looking at me with that annoying face while you say all this tedious shit is what's boring! Go knock yourself out! Shit! Why's it always Adelheid who gets good stuff happening to her?!"

"You're saying Adelheid has had good things happen to her?"

"Don't ask! 'Cause I can't say! Forget that and just be more violent! You're a prisoner!"

"Isn't prison for forcing prisoners to be serious and industrious?"

"You always have a line! Agh, whatever! You're dumpster trash!" Mephis yelled, grabbing the blanket she'd shoved aside, and with an openly sullen attitude, she threw herself down. Kana wound up left behind. Even if they were to discuss anything further, since she couldn't see any validity in Mephis's assertions, she was unable to reach a compromise, and since Mephis was not getting what she wanted, her mood wasn't going to improve, either. If anything could fix her mood, then would it be flattery and sucking up? If Kana was to compliment anything about Mephis… Maybe her generosity for allowing her to stay over, despite her irritation toward Kana? But she couldn't help but feel that even if she complimented her for that, it would just end up in oil poured on a fire. Society would call situations like this being out of options.

"So then does this mean I should wait like this until morning?" asked Kana.

"I don't want to talk to you anymore. There's nothing to you. You're just hot air."

Even with Mephis turned away from her, Kana clearly understood that she was angry. It seemed she didn't want to talk to Kana, no matter what. Had Mephis's detransformation been her way of announcing her decision to refuse to talk to Kana? Psychologically, this did seem convincing, but Mephis was difficult to understand from the get-go. That made her deeply interesting, but Kana could anticipate that saying that would just make Mephis angry with her again.

Kana shifted on top of the cushion, sliding her legs to the side. She did this since she assumed she would continue sitting like this until morning, and she decided she should adopt a more comfortable position. Next, she wanted something to kill time with.

Since she'd had a lot of restrictions forced on her to begin with, she was used to spending her time idly, doing nothing, but there had been so much stimulation lately. It would probably be painful to sit there with nothing. Laughing at herself for having become soft since being sealed away, and well prepared for Mephis to get angry at her again, Kana said, "If you're saying you don't want to talk with me, then I'll give up on that, since there's nothing I can do about it."

No response.

"Talking with you was fun," Kana continued, "but if I was the only one enjoying myself, then that's no good."

Mephis rolled over, turning her face to Kana. Her eyes were open. Her expression was a dangerous one. Her pretransformation face, the human one, had a certain kind of punch to it. "You're kinda pissing me off."

"Pardon me. Setting that aside, could I make one request?"

"What're you gonna ask for at this point?"

"I'd like something to kill time until morning. Could you lend me some analects of poetry or some such?"

"An ana…what? I don't really get what you mean, but you can just read a book. There's tons over there. Stop being a hassle. I'm going to sleep. Fuck off."

Kana had managed to obtain the permission of the head of household. Mephis said she was free to read, so she probably wouldn't criticize her, no matter what book she picked up. So Kana pulled a book off the shelf, flipped through a few pages, then put it back. She pulled out a different one and flipped through it, then pulled out yet another and flipped through it, and did this over and over, but got the same results.

Kana looked up at the ceiling. The stain there was shaped rather like a humanoid golem. "Mephis."

"What?!"

"There's nothing here I can read."

"Huh?" Mephis jumped out of bed. Shock and confusion rose on her face, and she leaped over to Kana like she was going to make a grab for her, snatching the book away from the side to look over it. In less than a breath's time, her expression calmed, and then her surprise and confusion turned to anger, her eyebrows inverting themselves. Kana sort of felt as if even Mephis's eyelashes were bristling. "You can read these just fine."

Opening up the book that was thrust back at her, Kana pointed

to one of the pictures drawn in it. “I don’t understand what this means.”

“It’s a normal manga.”

“What’s a manga?”

The anger on Mephis’s face turned back to confusion again. Watching her eyebrows move around alone was interesting, but if Kana said that, it would naturally anger her, so she didn’t say that out loud.

“Huh? What? Is this a gag?” Mephis demanded.

“What do you mean by gag?” Kana asked.

“You don’t know manga?”

“This is the first I’ve ever seen such a thing.”

“You’re lying. You’ve got to be.”

“I don’t lie.” Kana would sometimes not say the truth when she knew it, but that wasn’t a lie. Kana considered that just a bit of a device to make relationships smoother.

“For real? People like that exist…? I saw on online news or something that lately there are young people who don’t know how to read manga, but this is different from that, right?”

“Even before considering how it’s read, I’ve simply never heard of ‘manga’ before.”

“That’s crazy. So then that means you haven’t read *Gigabrant*, or *Daily Life of a Bugler*, or *Blood of Marchosias*. Actually, that means you don’t even know stuff on the level of *Bitty Kitty* or *Maru-Maru*—that’s just crazy, whoa.”

“I apologize for being uneducated in this matter, but this is all new information for me.”

Mephis sat down on the bed, crossing her legs as she muttered something under her breath. She seemed lost in thought, like her mind was elsewhere. The hem of her shirt was pushed up over her knees, exposing her underwear, but Kana had already learned that pointing out her underwear would make her angry, so she remained silent as she looked at Mephis’s face and underwear and continued to wait.

“Huh,” Mephis said finally. “’Cause you were in prison. You were in there the whole time, so you didn’t have any chances to come in contact with it. Wait, but if that’s why, then doesn’t that mean you were thrown in jail a way long time ago?”

“It’s not wrong that I haven’t had an opportunity to come in contact with it,” Kana replied.

“Ohhh. You understand the words, right? You speak Japanese pretty fluently, but it’s not like you can’t read or something, right?”

“There’s a translation magic in operation. All I’m unable to understand is how I should read it. It seems as if it’s a sequence of pictures, but there’s no numbers written to indicate what order they should be read. I’m not even sure in the first place if it should be read in order. And there are incomprehensible symbols all over the place as well. I assumed the words that seem like remarks surrounded by circles would be the dialogue spoken by characters, but there’s variation in these surrounding circles, and it seems different ones are used depending on the situation.”

“Ahhh, yeah. Oh. Huh. It’s like, I never really think about it, and I just take it for granted when I read them, but now that you mention it, maybe there are a lot of rules that are sort of, like, an unspoken understanding.”

Whether she’d noticed it or was doing so unconsciously, Mephis fixed the hem of her shirt with her right hand, then folded her legs the other way, and arched her back. Then she snapped forward again, stopping right before her face touched Kana’s. “In other words, like, you don’t know anything about the wide world of manga yet. So that means what sort of manga you read and what sort of manga you’ll come to like might all be up to me, huh. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Is it?”

“It is!” Mephis hugged her arms, gazed up at the ceiling, and let out a sigh of pathos. Kana looked up at the ceiling as well, but there was nothing there but that same stain and the electric light filled with soot.

“Look, magical girls generally like magical girls, right?” said Mephis.

“Well, isn’t that obvious?”

“Well, yeah. I do get that. But it’s not weird for there to be some people who aren’t really attached to magical girls, right? Well, I mean me, though. I like battle manga more than magical girls. I like ability battles where they use their smarts, I like fistfights between robots, I like martial arts with secret techniques, and I really love musclehead battle manga where they compete for beam output; I just like ones where they fight and fight. And really the best of the best of them are the delinquent manga.”

Kana didn’t understand loving battles that much, but it could be

that Kana being a weakling meant she'd been looking away from the essential pleasure of battle.

"Is that why you're so belligerent?" Kana asked.

"Don't say that."

"Pardon me." Kana tensed, thinking she had offended Mephis, but it seemed she wasn't particularly bothered, looking up at the ceiling.

"Like the Archfiend Cram School or something'd be cool," said Mephis. "Do you know about them?"

"I've heard the name before."

"Adelheid went there. But it's gone, now. Doing stuff like battle manga among yourselves and then, like, suddenly up and deciding you're breaking up and it's over, you can't just do that. I've got the right to participate, too. I'm sure it'd be fun to kick their asses."

"You shouldn't be reckless."

"Well, the biggest reason I'd like to kick the Archfiend Cram School's asses is that I don't like how full of themselves they act, but it's not like I don't want some battle manga kind of stuff to happen. It's 'cause I don't get any real battles that I have no choice but to read manga to slake the thirst." Mephis got up, and standing in front of the bookshelf, she muttered something under her breath, then pulled out a few books. She flipped through the pages to check the contents, then nodded like she was satisfied, stuck up her thumb, and indicated the bed. "C'mere. I'll teach you the depths of manga culture."

"Is it that important?"

"Yeah, it is. If you don't know about manga, that's about an eighty percent loss in life."

"Eighty percent seems too large, for just things to read."

"It's world changing. It's not just about entertainment. In this shit world, if the kind of person who constantly has anyone and everyone telling them to go die discovers there's even a little fun in living, and they come to think that they can't die until they read what happens next in this manga, and they find people they can talk to about stuff, like this week's chapter was so cool or whatever, then that's like an eighty percent change. No, maybe even more than that. I don't know what sort of life yours was, but it probably wasn't very happy; I mean, you were in prison."

"Regarding whether a personal sense of happiness is my ultimate goal or not—"

“Okay, no more being a drag. C’mon, just get over here.” Mephis lay down on the bed and patted beside her. Kana flopped down next to her, eyes falling to the page Mephis had opened up. This marked the beginning of her education on the various types of specialized knowledge, such as division of panels, bubbles, and various symbols. The sheets didn’t smell like a magical girl but rather a girl pretransformation.

◇ Snow White

Arlie had done a good job. It wasn't as if she'd originally been designed for information gathering. It was fair to say that she'd been created to fight, so even if she was happily reporting about how "this thing had happened" or "my friend said that," it was great information.

Still, it made it difficult to dig in deep. The presence of the exchange student Kana was extremely suspicious, but since she had only just transferred in, they still didn't know anything of significance about her. It seemed like Tetty and Mephis's quarrel was related to their past, but sloppy probing in that matter would certainly draw suspicion. It was also possible that Tetty and Mephis's spat was an entirely personal matter, so making Arlie suspicious of them for that sake was too much risk for the benefits. And most of all, after seeing Arlie enjoying her time at school with a smile, "necessities" like having her probe and investigate came to seem like too much.

Snow White spun her mechanical pencil twice over her finger. Thinking about all this serious business in this formal-feeling room furnished and sized just like a meeting room was getting suffocating. Figuring she'd make herself physically more comfortable, at least, Snow White laid a towel over the long table, took off her boots, laid her feet on the towel, and leaned back in her chair.

She looked up at the ceiling. It was dotted with little holes, like the walls of a music room.

She was gathering information from other routes aside from Arlie, too.

Thanks to Brenda and Catherine going out to do the rounds at night, Snow White had found out about Adelheid and Lightning's private battle.

Mana sent her any information that went through the Inspection Department that seemed like it might be relevant. Most likely her father, who was the chief of Inspection, was turning a blind eye to it.

Deluge had found out about Princess Lightning and was pulling

strings in the R&D Department. Snow White could tell from the voice of her heart that she was basically gritting her teeth as she did it.

Snow White had also gotten word from within the Osk Faction about the goings-on at the lab. That was the Osk research organization that was rumored to do all sorts of unethical research and experimentation, with human experimentation first on the list. Since the principal Halna was also associated with the Osks, they had connections to the magical-girl class and provided it with security homunculi at wholesale prices. And over these past few days, the number and quality of those security homunculi had gone up. If those had come before the magical-girl class had launched, that would be one thing, but coming one month after launch was suspicious. Snow White had the creeping feeling that something was off.

Lost in her thoughts, when she heard the voice, she was unsure of it. Jerking up in her seat, she looked over toward where she thought she'd heard it. Shadow Gale was tightening a nut with her wrench. There were mechanical things scattered all around her, but nobody was going to criticize her for making a mess. They left her alone staring vacantly at the machines while she tightened, connected, and made additions, over and over.

Snow White let out a big sigh. It must have been her imagination. She'd thought she'd heard a familiar high-pitched electronic voice murmuring "pon." But there was no way. Fal hadn't yet been found.

She brought her attention back to the matter at hand.

She just didn't have enough eyes at the school. She had to keep as close a watch over it as possible. And then, she would prepare so that if anything happened, she could intervene immediately.

A voice of the heart approached from the hallway. Snow White lowered her feet from the table, adjusting her seat on the chair with a composed expression as if she'd been sitting in it properly all along.

CHAPTER 8
DON'T WANNA GO HOME TODAY

◇ **Kana**

Once she was done reading the first arc of *Scrap-Iron Knuckle Dusters*, a total of fifteen volumes, Kana let out a slow breath and placed the final volume down on the bed. Mephis was watching her with an unusually tense expression.

Kana stuck up her right index finger and pointed to volume fifteen of *Scrap-Iron Knuckle Dusters*. "This is…" Now she exhaled from her nose, got up from the bed, took two steps toward the door, then three steps back to the window again, and turned around. "Interesting."

The tension melted off Mephis's face to reveal joy. But Kana's seriousness did not falter, maintaining her tension as she looked upon the book, eyes filled with only sorrow. "But is this all right?"

"It was interesting, right. What's the problem?" Mephis demanded.

"It's interesting…but isn't it *too* interesting? It's highly stimulating. And highly addictive, too. Despite having finished part one and reached a tentative conclusion, I want to read the rest so badly. Just what was the group that captured Tatsuo after he ran away? What was the *thing that dwells within* that Ryuuichi whispered of? And who is that legendary boss nicknamed Knuckle Dusters…?"

"So basically, you got into it."

"Isn't this stimulating beyond what should be sold to the public? If the population abandons everything and becomes engrossed in reading, the nation will fall apart. These works are mass-produced and put on the market at such a cheap price that they can be acquired by anyone, made for the sake of promulgation to—"

“Stop making this so complicated! Seriously, that’s the thing about you.”

“What sort of thing about me? If you could point out specifically—”

“Drop it!” Mephis stood up, smacking Kana in the back like a tough reprimand. Mephis forced Kana to sit and, once she was on the bed again, immediately plopped herself down by her side. The violence of her body language aside, her expression was peaceful, her cheeks unusually relaxed for Mephis, with a charming smile on. “If it’s hit you that hard, then you should just have a cooldown. Times like this, okay, you have a book talk. You chat about stuff like—this part was interesting, or that part looked like foreshadowing, right, to get yourself ready for more. That’s the sort of stuff manga fans do to cool their heads for a bit.”

“I see. Perhaps that’s logical.”

There was a mountain of things Kana wanted to talk about. She brought up things like the relationship between the protagonist and the rival, and if the countless acts of brutality that the largest biker gang in the prefecture was said to have done had actually been them, and couldn’t the protagonist’s father, a former gang leader, be straight with his son instead of always speaking so ambiguously.

“Gotta be careful not to spoil things,” Mephis replied with enthusiastic zeal. But when it came to the protagonist’s romantic affairs, she wasn’t willing to talk anymore, saying, “Not interested,” “It’s not that genre,” and “Forget that stuff, seriously.”

“I think it’s deeply interesting who will be the partner, though.”

“It’s a delinquent manga, so it’s about the battles—the battles! You can read romantic comedies or love stories or whatever for romance, so you should just leave the mushy stuff to those. Nothin’ beats a good rumble in the streets.”

“Couldn’t you also call the competition to see in what form genes will be passed to the next generation another sort of battle?”

“That’s not the kind of battle that a battle manga should be dealing with.”

“If you won’t talk with me about it, then where should I vent these feelings in my heart?”

“It’s nothing that dramatic, okay. Lillian’s a romance nut, so maybe she’ll be into it. She’s always reading nothing but lovey-dovey manga.”

“So there’s that sort of manga, as well?”

“Not in my place, though. I don’t like them.”

So there was a broader range of manga out there than what Kana had imagined. But this was Mephis’s apartment. Things that did not suit her tastes would be rejected. If Kana was to get serious about manga, then eventually the time would come when she would have to leave the nest and fly off from this place. But she would cross that bridge when she came to it. Right now, even just the manga in this room was enough. Excess of such stimulating pleasure would cause mental abnormalities. Putting her hand to her cheek, it felt a little warm. It was hotter than her regular temperature. This was even causing her physical abnormalities.

Mephis had suggested that they chat to cool down, but never mind cooling down—she was becoming even more heated. Kana judged that it would be dangerous to talk about manga any further. “You said Lillian likes romance manga,” she said.

“Yeah. Girls’ magazines, ladies’ comics—she’s game for it all,” Mephis replied. “She looks like the quiet type, but she’s actually not only into girl-boy stuff, she’s even okay with girl-girl or guy-guy. Even with full-on shounen manga with hardly any romance at all, she’ll squeal and get excited like, *‘Doesn’t this scene mean this?’* or *‘So and so might be trying to tell something-or-other he’s into him.’”*

“So that’s one way to enjoy it, huh.”

“And I’m always going to the post office every weekend to buy stamps for the prize send-ins, but I’ve never won anything, even once. Maybe that stuff is kind of like a scam. There aren’t many hardcore fans like me, so they could at least give me a bit of a freebie.” Since a number of technical terms had come up there, it was difficult for what she meant to get across, but Kana felt as if she had managed to get a general grasp on what Mephis was trying to say.

Kana stroked the line of her hair with the index finger of her right hand, then put her index and middle fingers together to point at Mephis. “Have you known Lillian long? It seems like you know her well.”

“Well, since before starting middle school, so I guess that does count, more or less.”

“What about Kumi-Kumi?”

“The same as Lillian, I guess. Just can’t get rid of either of them.”

“What about Adelheid?”

“I met her when we started here. She’s not a bad person, sort of.”

“Then what about Tetty?”

Mephis narrowed her eyes, then raised up one knee on the bed. Her gaze on Kana chilled somewhat, compared to before.

“Did I say something to offend you?” Kana asked.

“Well, if I have to say, then yeah. But it’s not really anything that big. We’ve known each other since we were little kids, and we became magical girls together; that’s it.”

“Considering that, you seem to have a fairly rocky relationship.”

“Well, yeah. After all that time apart, she’s gotten real full of herself. Way back then, she was always following me around wherever we went and hiding behind me when anything happened. But now she looks down on me, yeah? She acts like she’s so important. It’s like, who died and made you queen? And she was acting like a big deal in the mock battle, too. Like, what the hell.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway, why’re you asking stuff like that…? It’s like you’re trying to probe me for info.”

“That’s not my intention. You and I are in the same group—in other words, we’re allies. You would be curious about your allies.”

“Hmm. Huh.”

“It’s not only me. It seems like Kumi-Kumi, Lillian, and Adelheid are also worried about you.”

“Feh.”

“And Tetty, too. She’s often looking at you with concern.”

“What? For real?”

“For real.”

Mephis opened her mouth wide and made a bizarre shriek at the ceiling that made Kana want to cover her ears, and by the time she’d turned back to Kana again, her eyebrows were all the way up her forehead. Disgruntled, she yelled, “You trying to be team mom or what?!”

“What’s ‘team mom’?”

“You trying to act like my mother?! Who the hell do you think you are?! What kind of angle are you looking at me from?! How can you look down on me when we’re the same age?! You asshole! Idiot! Moron! Tetty!” Mephis threw a cushion, and it bounced off the wall, bounced off the floor, hit the edge of the bed, and

bounced again. Leaping to her feet in a rage, Mephis transformed into the black-haired magical girl. She made a fist, throwing a punch at the wall, but then right before it hit, she froze just a finger's width away and let out a long sigh. Her squared shoulders dropped.

When she turned back, it seemed she'd done the "cooldown" she'd described before, as she spoke more calmly than she ever had. But that just made her seem more intensely emotional. "Why aren't you stopping me?"

"What do you mean?" Kana asked.

"I'm renting this apartment. If I punched the wall with the power of a magical girl, it'd be a disaster."

"You're the head of household here, so I thought it would be best to let you do as you please."

"You *seem* sensible, but you're a total weirdo." Mephis let out a sigh about half as long as the earlier one and sat down next to Kana. She spread her legs wide, put her hands on her knees, and let her back hunch. She shot Kana a sidelong look from below. "My magic is kind of a roundabout sort of thing, right? It's not something you use head-on in battle, right?"

"It's more suited to battle than mine," Kana pointed out.

"But like, with Tetty or whatever, hers is totally combat oriented. If we got in a straight fight, she could easily pin my limbs. One grab, and she could crush me in the blink of an eye."

"She did very well in the mock battle."

"It's like, you know, way back before, I was the one protecting her. But then, like, ever since we became magical girls, man—I dunno, it's just—she's got a pretty battle-like kind of magic."

"I don't really understand what you're trying to say."

"Agh, whatever, if you don't get it. It's not like I really want you to get it anyway. More importantly, let's talk about you. Like, you seem pretty secretive."

Folding her legs, she pressed her right thumbnail to her lips and stretched out her back. Her braided hair surged, the ends pointing at Kana from every direction, and Kana slid back one third of a bottom's worth.

"You've never undone your transformation in front of me, huh?" said Mephis.

"I haven't."

"Doesn't that seem secretive?"

Detransforming had been Mephis's own free choice, and there was no reason at all Kana would have to do it as well. But even if she explained that carefully and politely, it would just make Mephis angry and would add nothing. This was one of the rules she'd learned from experience, in her countless failures since entering the school. In order to get through this, she should try approaching from another angle.

"There was once a magical girl called Archfiend Pam," said Kana.

Mephis furrowed her brow suspiciously. Her hair writhed in a circular motion. "I know that. She's the one who made the Archfiend Cram School, right? Why're you bringing her up now?"

"Archfiend Pam preached that you should never undo your transformation, whether it be with friends and acquaintances or other sorts of people."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I didn't hear as far as that. An acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance… No, I suppose it's an acquaintance of an acquaintance. I believe she was a magical girl who knew Archfiend Pam. My memories are vague, but I do have the feeling that I listened with some fairly deep interest. Still, it was just thirdhand information, so I didn't think to dig deep into the reason."

"The hell, that's just one of those *friend of a friend of mine* stories. Like how people always start off sketchy ghost stories. That basically kills all its credibility right there."

"No, I believe it was accurately communicated to me. The human form is nothing but a weakness."

"So then that means I… And wait, everyone in our class has shown you their weaknesses, but not the other way round. This is what I mean—if we're all a team, then do you gotta be so uneven like that? Let's be open with each other." Mephis was smiling with only one cheek. It was a bold smile.

Automatically, Kana smiled back at her with one cheek. You'd probably call this a weak smile. If she was comparing herself to Mephis, Kana could never hope to beat her in a verbal contest. Sometimes using intimidation, other times using flattery, Mephis would try to open up the door to Kana's heart. And with her magic added on top of that, even resisting her words required a great deal of patience.

“We have to go to school soon,” said Kana. “Mephis, prepare us breakfast.”

“Yep. Too bad, tonight’s the field exercise, so Calkoro told us yesterday to rest during the day.”

“…Now that you mention it, perhaps she did say that.”

“Don’t try to get outta this. It’s not like I’m asking for anything major, here. Let’s undo our transformations?”

Kana was not sure at all of her own fortitude. She thought it was common to believe that people who were locked up in prison would likely often not be good at restraint.

Kana was not confident she could put up with this forever. That phrase Mephis had said so casually, “if we’re all a team,” had loosed the hinges of the door, rattled the knob, and was sticking lubricant in the keyhole. The way this was going, it was becoming like Kana was doing something bad. Guilt that shouldn’t have been there was stirring in her heart, and the sudden urge to apologize was sneaking up behind her.

As you might expect from having a devil motif, Mephis had a smooth tongue. It wouldn’t be strange at all if Kana were bound by some outrageous contract unawares, just like that poor old Doctor Faust.

Kana consciously shifted her plan of action. This was not retreat. This was a change of course. She dropped the smile she’d made to match Mephis, tightening up her lips. Kana’s serious expression seemed to affect Mephis, as a powerful edge of seriousness came to her face. She looked back at Kana with sharp eyes.

Enunciating each of her words cautiously, Kana said to her, “Now…is not yet…the time.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I will…never…give up on…my dream.”

“Hmm?”

“Look him…in the eye. That’s…a wildcat.”

“Wait, hey… Those are all lines from that manga!”

“The Dead Road gang are all just dogs. They ain’t got any more brains than dogs, either.”

“You cut that out! I’m trying to have a serious talk, here!”

“Don’t ya worry, I’ll keep you safe.”

“You bitch!!” Mephis pounced on her, and Kana dived into the futon. Mephis’s hair tail zoomed in after her, and Kana slid through

the bed to escape from the pillow side, leap out, tunnel under the bed, and come out at the foot to pull a right, emerging in front of the bookshelf to throw the fallen cushion there at Mephis and hit her in the face. While fleeing, she repeated the lines that she "wanted to try using someday" that she'd learned from bingeing that manga.

Mephis howled, and Kana cowered. Without Mephis ever realizing, Kana had turned this into a chase instead, and at some point, the talk of undoing her transformation was like it had never happened. By making Mephis angry, Kana had turned the big minus of danger to herself into a plus. Her negotiation skills must have grown a lot, to be leading the devil around by the nose.

Eventually, her pursuer said with a laugh, "How can you remember that much just from reading it once?" and then the two magical girls played tag in the small bedroom for a while.

◇ Tetty Goodgripp

With the field exercise coming up so suddenly, she had a whole bunch of free time. Once Fujino got done with all the things she'd wanted to do on the weekend—cleaning, laundry, and tidying her room—she didn't have anything left to do. It was too early in the day for magical-girl activities, and having lived a life dedicated to being a magical girl, Fujino had nothing like a hobby.

She did advanced studying and review of her regular classes and her magical-girl bookwork, and she even put together the curriculum for Arlie and Dory as well. When she looked at the clock, it was still only eleven. The thought struck her that she should have made an appointment to go out to eat with the girls of Group One, and she bit her lip, then happened to flick her eyes to the calendar.

They were past halfway through May. More than a month had gone by since she'd entered the magical-girl school.

Looking back to ask herself if she was doing well, she concluded that she was probably not. She'd attempted to make up with Mephis, but in the end, she hadn't managed it. She'd only apologized, not made up.

Fujino had always been bad at inviting people to things or getting into a group of friends. For a child, this was a vital issue.

When she'd only started elementary school, she hadn't been able to make friends, and she'd tended to be on her own. The first one to be her friend had been Mephis—Fuuko Sayama. A little while after becoming friends, they'd both taken the magical-girl test together. Though they'd said things like, *"We're rivals, so no matter who passes, no resentments,"* when they had both actually passed, Fujino had relaxed and smiled. Things had really been fun then.

They didn't smile together anymore. When they'd reunited at magical-girl school, they'd both been pretty excited about it, and they'd talked and stuff without fussing over who was in what group—until around April. Now, that association had ended.

The recent tendency of the division between groups could be said to have originated with Fujino herself. She had to do something about that. She knew Mephis wasn't a bad person, after all.

Should she try to be a little more proactive about talking to her? But Fujino had only just reaffirmed that she wasn't good at talking. *Maybe I could focus on the courtyard Satou told me about*, she thought as she scribbled up a plan for making up on a piece of loose-leaf paper. She knew putting together planning documents didn't mean she'd be able to do anything according to plan, but she didn't have anything better to do anyway.

◇ Pshuke Prains

With the field exercise coming up so suddenly, she had a whole bunch of free time. That's what Pshuke had expected at least, but she had received an unexpected invitation. They were to meet up in front of the school gates and go together to a neighborhood cafeteria. She'd gotten her hopes up, wondering what kind of fancy clothes the other girl would show up in, but it turned out to be simply a school uniform. Still, Pshuke had come in her school uniform, too. Two middle school girls in their uniforms were drinking tea on a weekday afternoon. Fortunately, there were no customers here, and the staff didn't call them to task, either. Though they did have the excuse, just in case, that they were in AP classes that had the afternoon off, but if nobody was going to say anything about it, nothing could be better than that.

The girl with her was eye-catching, after all. She kind of faded

out among the rest of the class due to the presence of the inhuman beauty that was Princess Lightning, but Sally Raven in human form grabbed attention so effortlessly that she could be assumed to be an amateur model with an *Oh, of course she is*. Her eyes were large; her shapely nose was defined and high. Even as another girl, the picture she made on a daily basis, chatting with Lightning, was a treat for the eyes.

"There's something I kinda wanna talk about, yeahhh," said Sally.

"Is it something we can't talk about at school? Honestly, this is a hassle," Pshuke replied.

"Hey, don't say that. Pshuke, you don't think things have been a little weird?"

Pshuke answered instantly, "I do." She didn't even have to think about it. "Lightning fighting with Adelheid, and Lightning setting up Group Two during the mock battle—that's what you mean, right?"

"Oh, you're making this quick. That's exactly what I mean, yeahhh."

"Listen, this is all too much trouble for me. We're all right in the middle of puberty anyway, and magical girls are all weirdos to begin with, so obviously we're gonna do weird things, right? It's really way too much trouble to get dragged into every little thing. I don't wanna."

"Hey, now. I do get that feeling, but…"

The server came over with their rainbow peach tea, so the conversation was put on pause for a moment. It was an aesthetically pleasing tea, divided into seven different-colored layers. They took one snap of the scene around them, reflecting the sunlight streaming in from outside the café, and another snap of the two of them side by side, holding up their glasses.

They returned to their seats and resumed their discussion. "Pshuke," said Sally, "you were a pro before coming to this school, yeahhh?"

"A pro?"

"You were doing security at the *Cutie Healer* twentieth anniversary party, right? I'm from the PR Department. Since I like *Cutie Healer*."

Pshuke hadn't thought Sally would know of her. Naturally, a wrinkle came together in her brow. "So what about it?"

“Oh, I was thinking a pro would be able to tell. It seems to me like Lightning’s stirring things up deliberately. Like, you know, she might be doing it for some purpose, yeahhh.”

“So what if she does?”

“I don’t really like talking badly about people who aren’t there, but…,” said Sally.

“You starting a fight with me?”

“No, no, it’s fine for you to do it. It’s just that ultimately, I’m not into it, so I don’t want you to be offended. Ummm, Ranyi and Diko don’t really seem like they wanna interfere, either, right. So when Lightning goes off to do whatever she wants, we can’t stop her.”

“Well…that’s true.”

“This depends on Lightning’s plans and what she does, but worst case, you can imagine a situation where even we can’t graduate anymore, being in her group, yeahhh? It really looks to me like Lightning is trying to create divisions in the class.”

Pshuke didn’t nod. But she was mentally agreeing. She got the feeling Lightning wasn’t just acting wild because she wanted to. She wouldn’t let Group Three be friendly with the other groups, she’d made Tetty and Mephis fight, and she’d gotten into a fight herself with Adelheid.

“And then there was her fight with Adelheid, too, yeahhh,” Sally continued. “It really feels like something is there. And with the way Ranyi and Diko reacted, that was, like, it feels like they know something.”

Pshuke thought Sally had good eyes. But she didn’t want to compliment her out loud.

“Even if we don’t take this till graduation,” said Sally, “so long as I can keep on the job somehow up until the first term of next year without any big incidents, then I… Yeah, around the term after next, or the one after that, or after that, they’re talking about maybe making me a Cutie Healer. Just the name Cutie Healer Raven has gotten unofficial approval, and it really is a great name, right? So I really don’t want to get dragged into some weird trouble, yeahhh? So like, Pshuke. As pros, okay? The both of us. When things get real sketch, let’s work together. Yeahhh?”

The wrinkle between Pshuke’s brow eased just a bit. She understood what Sally meant. She wanted to agree, too. She absolutely didn’t want to get dragged into Lightning’s recklessness

and get expelled. If worse came to worst, she wanted to separate from the group to save herself. Sally was not included in that, but Pshuke nodded anyway, putting on an expression like they were in the same boat. “I like that. Agreed. Let’s go with that. So then, if the time comes, we help each other.”

“Ohhh, I’m glad this all went so quick with you. Just what I’d expect of a pro.”

“Well, you know. There is money hanging on this, after all. You have money on this, too, don’t you? Won’t you get quite a lot if you get chosen as a Cutie Healer?”

“Nahhh, not at all. A magical-girl anime is about the prestige.”

“Huh? Really? That’s dumb; what a waste of time.”

“Not at all.”

“Come on, but even if you do get to be Cutie Healer—that’s not even prestigious; the show only exists to make money.”

The expression dropped right off Sally’s face. She seemed strange. Letting out a sigh long enough that the air reached Pshuke, she drew in a breath just as long, then smiled thinly. “Pshuke. There are two types of magical girls in the world. Magical girls who love *Cutie Healer*. And magical girls who don’t yet understand how great *Cutie Healer* is.”

Ah, Pshuke thought. She’d experienced this very thing before, many times. This was the feeling of stepping on a land mine.

“There’s no school until this evening, so you’ve got lots of time, yeahhh? It’s okay; I’ll teach you all about how great *Cutie Healer* is, so that you can understand, Pshuke.”

Sally’s smile grew even stronger.

◇ Kumi-Kumi

With the field exercise coming up so suddenly, she had a whole bunch of free time. But even saying that, it wasn’t as if she could make effective use of this sudden free time. Kumi-Kumi went back to sleep until nearly noon, then went out to the neighborhood supermarket to buy groceries for lunch and dinner, put her reusable bag into her bicycle basket, went back to her apartment, listened to the creak of the stairs, fished in her pocket for her key, stuck it into the thickly rusted keyhole, and went into her apartment.

All she could think about was the class—but not about herself.

About Mephis. Kumi-Kumi thought things were mostly Mephis's fault. It was just that pointing that out would make Mephis angry and get them nowhere, so nobody said so. But she was sure the whole class agreed.

Ever since Mephis and Tetty had reunited in their class, they'd gotten into quarrels at every opportunity, like with the card game or mock battle, and it had planted a seed of discord in the class.

Of course Kumi-Kumi wanted them to make up. She wanted to graduate without any issues. Two of her friends fighting made things difficult. There was nothing good about it. But the issue came down to the single fact that Kumi-Kumi wasn't good enough at talking to mediate between them. Lillian in magical-girl form would be aware of the situation while also being fairly eloquent, but it seemed her motif influenced her in that area, and she'd act all enlightened and say things like *"Time should resolve matters for us"* with a know-it-all expression.

Lillian could not be counted on. The only one Kumi-Kumi could count on was herself. Even if she couldn't say it well, if she made a sincere effort to try to say what had to be said, her feelings should at least kind of get across. So then, what to do? As Kumi-Kumi pondered this, she opened up her fridge and put the groceries away. Pulling out the bottle of barley tea she'd made the day before, she poured some into a cup and drank it down. But in the process, her hand slipped, and she just about dropped it, and though she somehow caught it, she splashed some tea on the floor.

She couldn't go leaving a stain on the floor. Kumi-Kumi seemed to remember there had been a box of tissues on the table. Pulling open the sliding door to go into the living room, she was drawing a tissue from the box when she made eye contact with the person sitting on the opposite side of the table.

"Oh, welcome home."

Kumi-Kumi instantly transformed into a magical girl and readied her pickax, but before she took a swing with it, she slowly lowered it to the floor. She had seen this magical girl before. She had a fortune-teller-style costume and large crystal ball, but more iconic than her looks were her sickly sweet smile, her surprisingly clear eyes, and her voice, which put the listener vaguely at ease. What was her name again? She'd come to visit the Elite Guard in the past. Kumi-Kumi hadn't been informed specifically as to what her rank was, but she was in a high position—someone you couldn't

offend.

As Kumi-Kumi went through her mental inquiry, confirming that this information was not mistaken, she recalled that one of her seniors had complained that this person could be childish in odd ways and would sometimes give you weird surprises.

Once Kumi-Kumi had calmed her heart, she sat down at the table opposite the woman. “So…can I ask your business…with me?”

“That was a wonderful reaction. I’m glad I came to your place,” said the woman.

“Um…your business?”

“I wouldn’t mind some barley tea, either.”

Kumi-Kumi rushed to her feet again, and her knee bonked the table. Being in magical-girl form, it didn’t hurt, but it was embarrassing. The woman before her hid her mouth, and her shoulders shook, making Kumi-Kumi even more embarrassed.

Getting up as if nothing had happened, Kumi-Kumi poured barley tea into a cup and pushed it out in front of the visitor. It was just bargain-sale cold-brew barley tea, but the woman brought it to her lips as if it were absolutely delicious.

“The truth is,” said the visitor, “I’ve come here today because I have a very important request. Ahhh, I’ve already finished checking to see if there were any listening devices planted in your apartment; don’t you worry.”

“Oh…thanks.”

“About the magical-girl class you all attend. The original plans were arranged by the Puk Faction. After Puk Puck passed away, the Osk Faction snatched away the project, but the Osks were never aware of its true goal. Well—being unaware of it until recently myself, I can’t criticize. And so. The magical-girl class is ultimately a cover, as Puk Puck meant to use it as a backup plan for saving the Magical Kingdom. Puk Puck never did set the backup plan in motion, having lost her life on her main plan, but her backup scheme was never entirely wiped out. If things go well, it can also be reused for you, and so…I would like to ask for all of your cooperation.”

Since Kumi-Kumi had been so focused on memorizing everything the woman said so as not to forget a single word, she hadn’t gone so far as to scrutinize the content and only managed to grasp that she’d just been asked to do something.

◇ Calkoro

The students gathered in the classroom that night were in magical-girl form. Thinking about all it had taken to get here made Calkoro want to cry, but she firmly restrained the urge as she opened up the class list.

She'd been feeling quite miserable ever since she'd begun preparing for this exercise. Starting with her preliminary inspection of the mountain area, she'd gone over a total of a hundred spots that seemed particularly important, installed magical hidden cameras, and produced printouts that listed out points of concern for the exercise, and by the time she'd finished everything, it had been just about sunset. She felt like she'd been the one forced to go on a field march.

She'd come up with this plan in an attempt to lessen her own workload somewhat, but she couldn't help but feel that Halna had assigned her added suffering that hadn't been there originally.

Calkoro called Arc Arlie's name. Her reply sounded like chirping but was energetic. Going in syllabic order, she called Kana next. Her quiet answer was no different from the day before. When Calkoro's gaze hit Kana, she froze up. It took her an unnecessarily long moment to call the next name, Kumi-Kumi. Clearing her throat, she finally called her name, then continued roll call like usual.

While calling Classical Lillian's name, she glanced over at Kana. Her eyes hadn't fooled her. She was different from yesterday. Her hair was tied up in a bunch of ponytails that seemed wildly scrabbled together—was that some kind of spell or what? It was way too sloppy to be called fashion. A chain hung from the front of her uniform with a spiked iron ball on the end. These things, maybe you could insist were fashion, but the brass knuckles on her right hand were nothing other than a weapon.

Why had her clothes changed overnight? The school rules were supposed to have an article forbidding the addition or modification of costumes. But even if Calkoro were to use that as a pretext to order her to put her costume back, would she listen? She was clearly already ignoring the rule that you couldn't be transformed on a regular basis.

The roll went on to Mephis Pheles. Halna had told Calkoro about Kana staying over at Mephis's house, so she was aware of

that. So then wouldn't the most reasonable explanation be that Kana had been influenced by Mephis's delinquent interests? Looking over, Mephis seemed somehow smug or in a good mood.

If Mephis was influencing Kana, it would be best to stop her. The kind of student who was convenient to Calkoro was definitely not Mephis. Silently laughing at herself for being so teacherly, thinking about how she had to keep a good student from being sucked in by a delinquent, she called Rappy Taype's name. Her reply came loud, as usual.

"All right," Calkoro began, "tonight will be our field exercise, just as I explained beforehand."

Despite being such a sudden event, all the students had come. Halna wasn't going to get angry at her about the number of participants now.

"The location is the mountain behind the school. Stick with your groups and remain on standby at your designated positions. The exercise will start at eleven thirty on the dot. All right, please head out, everyone."

Confirming that the students were all out of the classroom, Calkoro headed for the Procedure Room. Despite the name, this was a room for configuring the homunculi that were mainly used in experiments and such. It couldn't be used without the permission of the two staff who worked in the school—in other words, Halna and Calkoro.

Calkoro slid her personal key card through the upper reader, then bent down slightly to slide the shared key card through the lower reader. The door slid open, the lights went on automatically, and the liquid that had been dammed back by the door flowed to her feet. Calkoro froze her footsteps.

It took her a while to grasp what was going on. The impossible had happened. There was a man lying limply on top of the long table in the Procedure Room. He looked like he was in his late twenties, wearing the basic mage fashion of a robe and triangle hat, and the fluid that was dripping down from his body—blood—had soaked through his robe.

Stepping over the puddle of blood that was pooling around her feet, Calkoro entered the room, approached the man's side, took his pulse, and checked his breath. He was dead. He'd already gone cold. There was no way he'd be alive, after losing this much blood.

Calkoro's shoulders were heaving. She couldn't stop. The air she

was breathing in and out was filled with the scent of blood, making her feel even sicker. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them. First, she'd report this. She reached out to the alarm installed in the room and stopped halfway. The security device had a large dent in it, most likely from blunt trauma.

Calkoro's pulse raced. She'd been the one to use the key card to open this place up. There was no one here aside from the fallen man. So then had he been the one to destroy the security device? Why?

For now, she'd just do what she had to do. She pulled out her magical phone. She didn't need the security device to contact the outside, or so she thought. But her phone wouldn't get through. Why? It didn't make sense.

What should I do? She looked right, then left, gaze wandering restlessly around to catch on the man's dangling hand. Pushing up her sliding glasses, she brought her face close to the back of his hand. It had a tattoo. She'd seen this insignia before. Members of that place would intentionally display the backs of their hands to show it off.

He's from the lab…!

Calkoro checked the settings. There were numbers on the screen she'd never seen before. She typed at the keyboard, but it wouldn't respond. The numbers just kept moving. Calkoro hadn't given authorization. What was going on here?

Halna was at a meeting at headquarters. She wasn't at the school. Since Calkoro couldn't contact her, she had no choice but to use her own discretion. Regardless, at this rate, all over this mountain, there would be homunculi—homunculi with values that did not at all seem like field-exercise use would be unleashed.

Oh, right… If I use the master communications unit… Will I make it in time?

Almost slipping on the blood, Calkoro ran out of the room.

CHAPTER 9
SCHOOL AT WAR

◇ **Tetty Goodgripp**

“Assemble! Numbers!”

At Tetty’s order, there were cries of “One,” “Two,” and “Three,” and then Arlie made a chirping sound. With that, roll call was done. They didn’t need to call their numbers to know they were all there, but it was sort of like a ceremony, and they did it every time. All five of them called their assigned numbers out loud with serious expressions, and once it was done, their faces relaxed into smiles, and they gathered in a circle.

Tetty looked around, putting her hands to her shoulders to lightly massage them. The sky was cloudless, the stars were dim, and the moon was shining like it owned the place, so it was surprisingly bright out. Magical girls didn’t need light to see clearly, but she was happy for it anyway so they didn’t have to walk down a mountain path in the dark.

“It feels totally different at night, huh?” Tetty said. “During the day, it feels like any other ordinary little mountain.”

“You shouldn’t let your guard down just because it’s small. I’ve heard people sometimes get lost out here,” replied Miss Ril.

“Come on!” Rappy shot back. “As if any of us magical girls plan on getting stranded!”

“Strand-ed,” said Dory, “by Clas-si-cal Li-lli-an?”

The sudden pun made everyone burst out laughing. After a good chuckle, Tetty raised her head. “Well, even if it’s a bit dramatic to say stranded, let’s avoid getting separated. Even if these are only training homunculi, being careless means you could get hurt. We don’t know how many homunculi there will be, either.”

Her own remark about getting careless and being injured

brought the last mock battle to her mind. It was thinking about that sort of thing on a regular basis that had made her body move when something happened. Mephis would hate being rescued or defended. She scolded her body to keep something like that from happening next time—but the mountain was big enough that she doubted they would come in contact with the other groups anyway. She felt pathetic for being so thankful about that.

"Hey, guys! I brought something fun!" Rappy opened up her palm to reveal some little objects wrapped like hard candies. Some sparkled pretty colors, while others looked like rough crystals.

"What are these?" asked Tetty.

"Minerals and stuff! I wrapped them up and brought them over! Hold them in your palm, Rilly! And then open 'em up when you need 'em! How about that? Isn't it a great idea?"

Miss Ril's magic let her absorb the property of whatever metal she touched, transforming her body. As Rappy said, bringing a bunch of items for her to use would really enhance her abilities.

"That is a good idea…," said Miss Ril, "but where did you get these from?"

"I just borrowed a few from the science room in the new school building!"

"Come on…don't take risks like that so casually," said Tetty.

"Hey! I didn't steal them! When I asked the science club kids, they shared some with me!"

Tetty could easily imagine that scene. She'd heard quite a few magical girls would go to the new school building to negotiate with kids from Umemizaki Junior High School. Not to say that other people doing it made it okay, but it was a minor crime, compared to stealing from the science room. Tetty exchanged a look with Miss Ril and smiled awkwardly—though Miss Ril's expression didn't change—and it was decided that Miss Ril would hold on to the things Rappy had borrowed.

"I'm impressed you came up with this, though," said Tetty.

"I mean, like! The other groups have been getting serious lately, right? So then we've got to come up with lots of ideas, too! I don't want to be lined up at the bottom rank during our graduation! Let's be the best students!"

"The best students wouldn't sneak into the school building," Tetty pointed out.

"That all depends on the parameters for best students," said

Miss Ril.

Feeling a tug on her skirt, Tetty turned to see Dory pointing up the mountain. Looking over, there was a black figure rising from the ground. Tetty checked the time on her magical phone. It was still 11:25—five minutes before the start time.

Weird, she thought, *Ms. Calkoro made such a point of the time*, and as she watched the figure move, it ran down the mountain path toward them, raising its claws. Before they swung down on Tetty, she grabbed its arm.

While locked in a struggle against the homunculus, Tetty called out to the others. "It's not eleven thirty yet, right?"

"Not yet," Miss Ril confirmed.

"But this means it's started now, right?"

It wasn't just the one; more jet-black figures were rushing in. Tetty was forced to crush the arm of the first unit, then grab its head and rip it from the torso.

"Looks like we're starting early," said Rappy.

"Should we check with the teacher?" asked Miss Ril.

But with the homunculi grabbing at them one after another, this wasn't the time to make any calls. Dory swung her drill, and Arlie knocked one down with a body blow, then slammed a fist into it. The battle had already begun in earnest. This was beyond a situation where they could do nothing and say they just waited since it was early.

Tetty gave instructions. "We have no choice, given the situation! We're moving on in!"

"'Kaaay!"

"Let's do our best, everyone."

"Beeest!"

Since they'd already gotten started, that just made things faster. With Tetty and Dory in the lead, they kept in a formation that protected one another's backs, defeating the homunculi as they made their way forward. The mountain path was comparatively well maintained, and since the homunculi were spawning along the path, it was very easy to follow. The girls tore at, crushed, bashed, and grabbed the homunculi until their numbers gradually dwindled.

"Therrre!"

Farther down the path, homunculi were gathering. While sticking to their formation, Group One headed on that way, keeping up the pace as they continued taking down the black figures.

“Hey! You think these’ll count toward our total?” Rappy wondered aloud.

“She said there were cameras set up…but I don’t see them,” replied Miss Ril.

“They’re magical hidden cameras, aren’t they?” said Tetty.

“And therrre!”

Discovering a group of homunculi, they hurried over. Tetty bashed and crushed several and was about to run off to the next when her feet stopped. Since she was in the lead, everyone else came to a halt along with her. “What’s up?” Rappy called out curiously. “Did something happen?” Miss Ril asked with concern. But Tetty didn’t respond, only stood there. It wasn’t that her feet had stopped—her legs just wouldn’t move.

The jet-black figure rising up in front of them was of a completely different shape from the ones they’d fought before. It had a rapier at its belt and was wearing knee-high boots. Between its costume and overall appearance, there was no question—it had been designed to look like a magical girl. The feather decorating its cap fluttered in the wind.

Its characteristic jet-black body and smooth surface texture were the same as the other homunculi, and that made its magical-girl shape feel grotesque. But Tetty hadn’t stopped because it was creepy or bizarre. A shiver ran through her spine, heart, and lungs; just being close to this thing made her feel weak in the knees.

The jet-black magical girl rose up, and a split second later, Tetty was grasping its rapier in her right mitten. The fencer drew its sword and thrust. Tetty didn’t even notice that the rapier had been drawn, and she hadn’t been able to see the step in or the thrust, either. By the time she thought, *Ah*, it was right in front of her. If not for her magic mittens, she would have been stabbed.

Tetty blocked the fencer’s knee drive with her left mitten. While she was hesitating for a moment as to whether she should crush it or not, something flashed.

Rappy screamed, and Miss Ril shrieked.

At the same moment as that knee strike, the fencer drew a dagger with its left hand, slicing at her. Tetty only had two mittens, one on each hand. She’d stopped the rapier first, then blocked the kick, and both her hands were occupied. She let the dagger’s attack through. Blood spurted from her cheek.

She didn’t even have to think what she should do next. She

released the leg and the rapier, knelt down on the ground, and bowed her head.

"Your Excellency, please forgive me for my rudeness."

The general clapped its hands twice, acknowledging her apology. Grateful for the general's generosity, Tetty rose and turned toward the traitors.

"Tetty!"

"Hold on a sec! The heck's going on?!"

They were all powerful magical girls. But Tetty would destroy them. She would eliminate all enemies to protect the general.

◇ Pshuke Prains

The jet-black magical girl threw a straight punch—which dropped halfway to shift to a low kick instead. It was so terrifyingly fast, it was all Pshuke could do to follow its moves and feints with her eyes.

Diko hopped on the spot to dodge. As she escaped into the air, a jet-black right arm stretched toward her face, but right before it made contact, Diko used her magic to vanish, and the jet-black magical girl's swipe whiffed through air. That was when Group Three surged in.

With Sally from the air above, holding the leg of her crow, and Lightning bounding off a tree, they launched themselves at the jet-black magical girl. Pshuke sprayed misted lubricant ahead of her to skid along toward the enemy. In a high-speed slide with a reduced friction coefficient, she was putting together a mental plan of getting the enemy's leg in a joint lock, but a new black shadow slid out from behind a tree and blocked her way. With a click of her tongue, she jumped to the right. Sally and Lightning were both disrupted, too.

Diko appeared. A black magical girl with roses on her shoulders attacked with an unhesitant sequence of spear-hand, block, and palm strikes. Diko blocked and struck back with a knee, and the enemy countered with an elbow slamming down, following it with a knife hand when Diko staggered, and Diko vanished again.

"Luxury Mode: On." Lightning was slicing at the one with the roses when a new unit—a silhouette like an armored warrior with a *naginata* at the ready—interrupted her with a slash. Their blades

clashed, sending an armored shoulder pad flying and knocking away one of Lightning's drums.

The unit that appeared before Pshuke carried a cylindrical object under its right arm. Before even realizing that it was a Gatling gun, Pshuke had run off into the shadows, from one tree to the next. The bullets that trailed after Pshuke blasted away the thicket with a bursting din, tearing up trees and tossing up dirt and sand. The line of their impact approached Pshuke. Tree roots were shredded, and her legs ached with the strain.

She was at her limit. She tried running around in an attempt to cause friendly fire, if possible, but the enemy was making sure to avoid attacks on their allies with surprising sensitivity. Pshuke rolled away from an attack, but when her hand reached out to try to climb a tree, a girl in a black karate gi front-kicked her high into the air.

Pshuke had managed to guard it in time. But her right arm was numb. Breaking tree branches and scattering leaves as she landed, she turned back to try to return to her group, but a black shadow instantly blocked the way, leaving her with no choice but to flee in the other direction. The others were getting farther and farther away.

It was hard to understand what had happened. The black magical girl–like creatures were probably homunculi. Pshuke had seen a type of homunculi called Demon Wings, which had been developed based on Archfiend Pam's motif. But even compared with those, what they were seeing now was too similar to magical girls.

She pictured a detour in her mind's eye to get back to the others. This wasn't the kind of situation Pshuke could get out of on her own. If she got surrounded, she'd be crushed. She started running and immediately stopped. Something black was welling up from the earth, blocking the way ahead. It took the form of a girl with a javelin in each hand, and it pointed them both at Pshuke.

This again?! Crap!

Pshuke jumped to the side to avoid the javelins' attack, spraying a mist of magically enhanced hot pepper extract, but it didn't seem to work at all; the red just stained the homunculus's face as it thrust its spears at her. Pshuke somehow avoided its continuous thrusts as she backed up, and the moment her back touched rough bark, she went down on all fours like a beast, sticking out her leg as the enemy stabbed through the trunk behind

her, landing an attack on its solar plexus before backing up and getting away.

The enemy yanked its javelin out of the tree and stuck its two javelins, right and left, together, and twisted them. With a whoosh, a massive blade appeared, and the two javelins transformed into a giant halberd. Despite all her complaints, Pshuke had been diligently taking notes in class, so she knew this was Halberd Emimin, the magical-girl criminal who had been traveling around, carrying out robberies as she went.

The homunculus swung the halberd up. Pshuke evaded it with a sideways leap, but its strike was so powerful that it made the ground shudder, and it was hard to stay on her feet. It blasted away tree trunks, split open the earth, and sent dust billowing into the air. With dust, branches, and leaves falling all around, Pshuke kept moving, racing all around the black Emimin as she sprayed lubricant over the ground.

Pshuke smothered her shrieks as she avoided the second and third attacks, and as Emimin had her weapon raised for a fourth, the homunculus stepped on a patch that had been sprayed with lubricant and staggered. With the enemy's stance unsteady, Pshuke went into a low-friction-coefficient slide to get this one's leg now, twisting her ankle, then breaking her knee. After taking the enemy down, before she got up again, she sprayed adhesive all over the enemy to stick it to the ground, then immediately got away.

An instant later, Pshuke ducked to avoid an attack from behind. This was a new one. From a low stance, Pshuke sprayed a strong liquid acid above her, but the new foe ignored the burning of its body as it made a grab at Pshuke, taking her by the shoulders. Pshuke's water gun could ultimately only spray mist, so its force would always be inferior.

Held down from above, she felt a foot stomp on her right hand, the one holding her water gun. The part of the jet-black magical girl that corresponded to the mouth split open to reveal countless sharp needle fangs inside.

With its mouth gaping open, the jet-black magical girl tried to bear down on Pshuke but was slammed aside with a crash. It rolled away, hit a cliff, and came to a stop.

"Hurry! Get on my back!" The homunculus had been knocked away by a magical girl with glasses. It was Calkoro, transformed.

Pshuke did as she was told, and they immediately took off.

Calkoro used her hands and left foot to support her body with the edge of her giant abacus, paddling her right foot on the ground to move forward, like a skateboard. It was entirely the wrong way to use an abacus.

Pshuke sprayed lubricant at the earth behind them. The homunculus that tried to follow them slipped and pitched forward, making a dramatic noise as it fell over. It got in the way of the other jet-black magical girls farther behind, and they crashed into one another.

There's more and more…!

The number of homunculi was increasing. Calkoro yelled something, and when Pshuke faced front, she saw multiple jet-black magical girls rising there, too. This time, Pshuke fired her lubricant at the ground ahead, temporarily speeding up the abacus to race on through before the homunculi could finish rising up.

"Don't! Do anything weird! Without asking!" Calkoro yelled. "If I can't calculate it, we definitely would have overturned just now!"

"Ms. Calkoro!" Pshuke also yelled. She rarely ever raised her voice like this. "What is going on?!"

"They're out of control! This doesn't make sense! Why is this happening?! With the homunculus?! The principal and I! Are the only ones with authorization! They can't go into combat mode without our authorization! They shouldn't! But the lab! He was dead!"

With a fallen tree acting as a ramp, the abacus took a jump.

"The security device was broken! And my magical phone isn't getting through! And the school equipment isn't responding to my commands at all! So I thought if I broke the master unit! On the observation deck on this mountain! There's the master unit!" Calkoro twisted around in midair, going from landing to instant reacceleration like she was drifting with a car.

Pshuke yelled, "You haven't reported this?!"

"I told you I couldn't use the terminal! And the security device is broken. And we don't have the time to search for a way to contact Central Authority! If we just break the master unit, they'll stop! The lab! Developed them! The new-model homunculi! On their own! The lab's security system! Has gone out of whack! It's not my fault! I didn't do anything!"

"Complaining at a time like—" Before Pshuke could finish saying "this," the abacus slowed, then stopped. A black figure was

rising up down the way. Though it was all black, Pshuke could see it was standing with a crisply straight posture, with a fluffy skirt, a crown on top of its head, and other lavish accessories.

There was a shrill noise like a draft blowing through an old house. It was the sound of Calkoro's exhale.

"Hey, Ms. Calkoro," said Pshuke. "Why are we stopping?"

"A copy of…Grim…Heart… No way—why?"

The black queen slowly began to move. It seemed she hadn't seen them yet. Rather than slipping under her arm, it would be faster to crush her now—but Pshuke didn't even have the time to think that, as the abacus turned right around, and Pshuke clung to Calkoro's back. They started racing right back in the direction they'd come.

"Ms. Calkoro! The other way! There's tons of enemies this way!"

"If that's what we're up against…I'd rather fight tons of enemies!" Calkoro yelled, and the abacus sped up. Before their eyes, the countless jet-black magical girls that blocked their passage were increasing in size. Cursing, Pshuke pointed her water gun ahead.

◇ Kumi-Kumi

She didn't understand what had happened, but it was clear that this situation was abnormal. Gunshots, explosions, screams—any and every kind of violent noise tore through the tranquility of the night, with no sign of stopping. The horde of jet-black magical girls that surrounded Group Two tightened their circle.

Kumi-Kumi made eye contact with Adelheid, Mephis, and Lillian. Adelheid, Lillian, and Kumi-Kumi nodded, and for some reason—she must have just gone along with everyone else without getting what it meant—so did Kana. Finally, Mephis nodded firmly. "Let's get pumped and go, bitches!"

"Yeah!"

"Right!"

"Yippee ki-yay!"

"Nothin' beats a rumble in the streets," Kana muttered in a calm manner that ran contrary to the meaning of the statement, but nevertheless, she was charged for the fight.

Mephis and Adelheid were side by side as they dived into the

enemy forces. The all-black bodies conformed to the template of homunculi but were shaped completely differently from the ones Kumi-Kumi knew.

Mephis punched, kicked, and punched again at the nearest enemy. The unit she hit swiped aside her fist with the back of its hand. The black figure shifted smoothly to a jab-jab-straight, then hook. It moved fast, and its combo was tight. It was as good as a magical girl.

Adelheid bashed into it from the side and cut it down. She split open its boxing-gloved hands, then sliced open its windpipe with her return swing. The homunculus gushed black fluids and collapsed. From behind, one more, two more, three, four—a wide variety of magical girl–type homunculi appeared one after another.

"That one just now!" Mephis yelled.

"What?!" Adelheid yelled back.

"It's like one we learned about in class!"

"Do ya need to say that now?!"

Adelheid stepped in. She sliced down one enemy, but a second stopped her thrust. The black magical girl that had blocked Adelheid's saber with its giant shield slammed Adelheid. Adelheid was sent flying into a boulder back-first, but she still didn't flinch.

"Kaiser Schlacht!"

Bounding off the rock, she slammed her whole body into the great shield, striking it with an attack that used the energy from the damage she'd taken. She bashed and bashed, and when the enemy's guard weakened at the side, she hit it with a roundhouse kick that was supple like a whip. Right before it would have connected, a bullet shot at her from the rear diagonal, and she dodged at the last second, somersaulting away.

The cowgirl in a ten-gallon hat that had fired the shot followed up with three more shots. Adelheid rolled on the ground to avoid the first, cutting down the remaining two shots with her saber. The gunslinger dropped her handgun on the spot and drew a shotgun from her belt. Even Adelheid wouldn't be able to slice that down. She rolled and leaped, just dodging. One shot, two. With every shotgun blast, rock shattered and earth flew, pitting countless holes everywhere.

"Screw you, bitch!" Taking advantage of the opening where its attention was focused on Adelheid, Mephis kicked at the cowgirl as well, but the homunculus safely avoided it, pointing its shotgun at

Mephis next.

"Don't dodge my fuckin' kicks, you chickenshit!" Mephis yelled, and the cowgirl paused for just an instant. Even when Mephis stepped in range to kick, the homunculus somehow avoided it—but it didn't manage to dodge Adelheid's slice coming from behind. With its back cut in half and scattering black liquids, it blocked Mephis's kick with its shoulder, rolling away back into the group.

"That one's like a cockroach!" Mephis said. "Drop dead already!"

"One in every few o' these critters is a real beast!"

As if matching Adelheid's heads-up, the jet-black magical girls moved up the mountain like liquid sloshing along, hiding in the shadows of the trees to vanish. Before Kumi-Kumi could wonder why, two little balls were tossed in to roll around—Adelheid shoved Mephis down, and Kumi-Kumi ran.

Adelheid covered Mephis, and Kumi-Kumi dropped on top of both of them. The two hand grenades that had been thrown in exploded, the shock and sound of their blast sweeping the whole area.

With dust billowing up around them, Mephis, on the very bottom, yelled, "You're too heavy!"

"I can't help…being heavy…"

"And slow!"

"I'm…sorry." Making a noise like an engine drive, Kumi-Kumi rose to her feet. Adelheid pressed her head, somehow getting herself up despite her swaying, then extended her hand to Mephis, the two of them supporting each other as they got up.

"Can you guys still hear? You're not hurt?" Mephis asked.

"Somehow," said Adelheid.

"No…problem."

"The next group is coming!" Lillian warned the others.

The trees being blasted away had opened up the whole area, giving a nice view and making the night sky easier to see. With the space made so it could accommodate even more numbers, greater hordes of black figures than ever before loomed beyond the dust that still had yet to thin.

Adelheid readied her sword in the standard stance, blade raised to eye level, while Mephis raised her fists in front of her face, Kumi-Kumi lined up beside the two of them, and Lillian took up position protecting their backs.

“Oh-ho,” Kana muttered, looking at Kumi-Kumi. “How interesting. It was made with your magic, Kumi-Kumi.”

“Lillian’s magic…is in it, too.”

Right now, Kumi-Kumi was wearing her handmade armor.

She’d been working on it bit by bit on a regular basis, whenever she had the spare time. Gathering gratings, bricks, concrete, parking chocks, household electronics, and other parts from rubbish sites and large-sized refuse, she’d broken it all down and reassembled it with her magic, putting it together to make armor parts that she’d sneaked into the school warehouse and hidden. She’d begun it with the casual thought that if she ever got found out, she could just stop, but no matter how much time passed, she was never discovered, and her parts-making had gradually gotten deeper, and now it had become a tough armor that would even resist a magic hand grenade.

A mix of concrete, asphalt, and the thick rubber tires used for playgrounds, and then further strengthened with her magic, it was as sturdy as a fortress. She’d been excited to bring it to that night’s field exercise, thinking it would be really powerful, but she’d never imagined it would be useful in the sense of protecting her life.

Weaving it together with Lillian’s magic yarn had made it possible for the joints to move smoothly, and she’d also actualized over triple the efficiency in the transmission of force. Tucked inside the armor, Kumi-Kumi could move the giant arms and legs as if they were her own body.

At this point, you couldn’t just call it armor anymore. Standing at six feet tall, this construction was so perfect, you could call it fortified armor. She kept the name—Powered Kumi-Kumi Fortress Mode—tucked away in her memory and did not tell anyone.

Kumi-Kumi wanted to brag about this stuff, but looking at the way the enemy magical girls were moving, she couldn’t afford to be so brash.

Clanking as she advanced, Kumi-Kumi swung her right arm to swipe away a jet-black magical girl, and moving more smoothly than a living creature, she shifted to a roundhouse kick with her left leg, slamming back two homunculi together. When she followed up with a back-turn kick, the enemy backstepped away, but she guarded herself from the enemy’s spinning circular saw with her right arm’s shield. It felt heavy. The round saw dug a third of the way into her shield and stopped. If that had gone straight into a

magical girl's body, it would have cut her in two.

As Adelheid had said, one in every few of them was a powerful unit.

"Leave the easy ones…to me! You take…the strong ones!" said Kumi-Kumi.

"Roger!"

"Ah got it!"

"Everyone take care!"

"As for what you define as strong—"

Clad in her fortified armor, Kumi-Kumi mowed down enemies and sent them flying. The units that resisted or avoided her attacks, Adelheid and Mephis fought, while Lillian guarded her major blind spot at the rear. And though she couldn't see very well, out of the corner of her eye she caught Kana, for her part, dodging enemy attacks and such. She seemed to be muttering something to herself, but Kumi-Kumi couldn't hear what it was. Figuring that if she wasn't getting in the way, it should be fine to leave her like that, Kumi-Kumi advanced.

Though her thick armor was getting worn down, she gradually made her way forward, breaking through the area that had been destroyed by the hand grenades. The plan was to cut diagonally over the mountain and escape to the outside world. Since this was beyond a field exercise now, there was no reason Group Two would be blamed for escaping. Kumi-Kumi wondered if the other groups were safe, but she shook that thought off. They didn't have the time to be worrying about other people. She swung her arm, then a leg, an arm, an arm again, and suddenly she felt the weight there go light.

She looked at her right arm. The fist section was missing. It had turned to black dregs that scattered in the air.

She looked at the enemy she thought she'd just punched. It didn't even look as if it had attacked. It was just standing there. Kumi-Kumi punched it, and when her armored fist touched it, it disappeared. It was a magical girl in a headdress and other fluttery accessories. Though it was black all over, patches and other repairs could be seen here and there on her costume.

Kumi-Kumi bashed the patchwork girl with her left arm. The part that hit the homunculus became black dregs and vanished. The magical girl wore a bright smile of sincere enjoyment. A chill ran down Kumi-Kumi's spine. This one was different from the others.

This was beyond being strong or weak. She couldn't fight this. Kumi-Kumi let the giant frame of Fortress Mode fall down on top of the homunculus and undid all its connections, putting her hand on the shoulders of the suit to do a backflip and escape to the rear.

She mercilessly abandoned the armor that she had so painstakingly put together. She thought it would gain her a bit of time, at the very least. But she didn't even get a blink of an eye before she discovered that even that thought had been an underestimation.

The patchwork magical girl pierced through the thick armor as if there were nothing there. There was no resistance at all, black dregs dispersing around as she approached. Her right arm reached out, her broad grin coming closer. Kumi-Kumi was in midair. There was no way for her to get away.

She started opening her mouth, thinking she had to say something to the others, at least, and then a dull impact hit her in the side, making her cough and scatter spit.

It was Kana. She'd leaped in from the side, scooping Kumi-Kumi in her arms to land and then keep running. The patchwork magical girl landed after them, pursuing them both. Kana left the path, racing deeper into the wilderness.

Still in her arms, Kumi-Kumi was about to order her, "Don't run," but seeing the patchwork girl in pursuit, she clenched her jaw. No. They had to run now. This time really was hopeless. They'd die if they got touched. No damage got through. Even if all of them—Mephis, Adelheid, and Lillian included—joined forces, there was no way they could beat that. So then it was better for Kumi-Kumi and Kana to lure it away, while the others could use that time to move.

Still carried in Kana's arms, Kumi-Kumi pulled out her pickax, swinging it to scoop out the ground. The cluster of cubes that had been earth until a moment ago showered the patchwork girl pursuing them, but they just turned into more black dregs. Never mind stopping—she didn't even slow down.

The enemy was pretty fast, but Kana's legs were, surprisingly, even faster. They gradually pulled away, and Kumi-Kumi started to get optimistic, thinking if they could just lead it around a ways behind them, then somehow—but then for some reason, Kana suddenly stopped. Kumi-Kumi's head bonked into the back of Kana's, and she groaned. "What…?"

She looked ahead. A single magical girl in black stood there.

◇ Kana

She didn't have to dig into her memories to recall the homunculus that stood before her. Kana leaped straight up, grabbing a tree branch to dodge the patchwork homunculus as it came charging from behind. Using the tree branch as a horizontal bar, she spun around to turn back in the opposite direction, and with the momentum of her spin, leaped, ran, and accelerated.

"Why…run? We should have…kept going," Kumi-Kumi said.

She was not at all wrong. The homunculus standing there hadn't even made to look at them. It would have been obvious to assume they could have slipped under its arm or knocked it away. But Kana knew—there was no hope in going forward.

"The one standing there like a queen is without a doubt Grim Heart," said Kana.

"Grim…Heart…?"

"The most powerful fighter of the Osk Faction. If the homunculi deployed here are designed based on real magical girls, we should assume its combat capabilities are proportional to hers. Even if that possesses only a third of Grim Heart's strength and our whole class came at her, we would all be destroyed."

"Even if…she is strong…if she doesn't see us and is just standing there…"

"It looked to me as if she wasn't merely standing there, but that she was guarding something. Over that way is…"

"I think it was…the way to the observation deck…"

"In other words, she's guarding that. Though I don't know why."

"But…still…we're being chased… It would be better than that patchwork…"

Kumi-Kumi was yet again not wrong. The patchwork magical girl would nullify any kind of attack and couldn't be affected by anything. At a glance, she seemed invincible. But she wasn't necessarily invincible in the true sense of the word.

Kana turned back and called out, "What's your weak point?! Tell me!"

"I see," Kumi-Kumi muttered, her fingers on Kana's shoulders squeezing harder. "Your magic…gets the answers to questions, huh. So then…her weakness…"

"No, it seems unfortunately she speaks a different language. She

doesn't understand me."

Kumi-Kumi moaned, and her fingers squeezed Kana's shoulders harder.

Running between the trees, they expected to find the others of their group again, but the place where they'd been fighting was already empty, with no trace of either allies to rely on or homunculi.

Kana had no more time for thinking. Black shadows were slowly oozing out of spots where there had been nothing before. The footsteps racing gleefully behind them were coming closer.

As Kumi-Kumi's fingers were starting to squeeze even harder, Kana laid her hands over them. The crushing squeeze of her fingers let up.

Though the patchwork homunculus hadn't understood her, it wasn't as if Kana couldn't communicate with any of them. Though they were mentally slow, the vast majority did understand words. And the whole time, Kana had been asking them their weaknesses.

The magical girl–type homunculi all had three weaknesses in common: They slowed down when exposed to bright light, particularly the light of the sun; they avoided friendly fire at all costs; and they listened to orders from the administrator. It would be a while before the sun rose, and Kana didn't know where the administrator was. So that left one thing to take advantage of.

Kana grabbed at a homunculus that was rising up right that moment, taking it by the shoulder with her right hand, her left going between its thighs to grab it. Unflinching as it kicked her and punched her in the face, she wrenched around the body in her grasp to swing it at the footsteps running toward them.

Homunculi would always avoid hitting their allies. The patchwork homunculus's touch in itself was an attack. So then what would it do if an ally's body was flung toward it? Kana figured it would disable its magic and attempt to catch its ally's body. This was really just a guess—a gamble, so to speak—but she thought the odds weren't so bad.

There was a sound like splashing water. The two homunculi collided, and the patchwork homunculi's upper body was pulverized. It staggered, fell, melted into the earth, and vanished. Kumi-Kumi tossed away what was left of the homunculus she held, and that melted and disappeared in the same way.

She beat down the remaining homunculi with her bare hands,

routing the units that came to attack her from behind.

On Kana's back, Kumi-Kumi let out a sigh that sounded like it came from the depths of her heart, jumping down to take two, three steps, then stretched her back as she checked to see that she could still move.

Finally, she leaned her hands on her knees and let out a sigh even deeper than the last, narrowing her eyes as she looked up at Kana. "Good grief…that was…reckless."

"Pardon me."

"But…you saved me. Thanks."

"I'm very much obliged."

Even as they were talking, black bubbles swelled up all over, about to rise. If these were being generated automatically, then they didn't have the time to be standing around. Some of them would be strong ones like the patchwork girl, or worst case, even ones that were beyond the limits, like Grim Heart.

"What should we do?" Kana asked.

"We head…this way." Kumi-Kumi pointed her pickax down the hill.

"You mean we run?"

"From here…it's difficult to…search for the others…and meet up. Our magical phones…aren't getting through…either. So then…we should…get out…and report this…from the school."

"I see."

Readying her pickax, Kumi-Kumi took the lead, feet pointed toward the countryside. Right as she was about to set off, a black wall appeared, blocking the area right in front of her. She couldn't stop. Kumi-Kumi was moving toward a wall that was completely the same texture as the homunculi—Kana grabbed her by the collar and yanked, pulling her back as Kana pitched forward.

Kumi-Kumi, her face twisted in shock, drew farther away. Kana's body was on the black wall. She was being pulled in. Her body heat was being sapped away. She sank in. Kumi-Kumi reached out to her.

"Stay back."

With just that brief final remark and a watery sound, Kana's whole body sank into the black wall. She couldn't see anything; she couldn't hear anything. All that came to her was a keen sensation of pain, like being strangled, and her body heat being continuously sapped away. *I guess this is what dying feels like*, she realized.

It was rather anticlimactic that her final words were “stay back.” In manga, people would say a little more of what had to be said before they died. But she supposed reality was like this. Kana convinced herself that perhaps having been able to save her classmate made this not so bad, and she was somewhat satisfied with that. She still wanted to enjoy school, and she had lingering attachments to that manga she hadn’t finished, but she knew the trick to happiness was a certain degree of resignation.

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

There were enemies in front of her. Behind her, too. There were few allies. A lot of people from the Archfiend Cram School were battle junkies, but still, it had to be a minority who would enjoy this.

But she wasn’t going to whine about it. Adelheid had jumped into this being fully aware that it was a battlefield. Even if it was more of an intense battle zone than she’d expected, she wasn’t going to run. Slicing up and then away, back-to-back with Mephis, dicing up the black magical girls that were captured in Lillian’s casting net, the trio climbed up the animal trail.

After getting separated from Kumi-Kumi and Kana, they hadn’t been able to hold position. Even if they had waited for the other two, the patchwork girl would have followed. All they could do was pray that the pair would somehow escape the patchwork homunculus or defeat it.

The blade of her saber was slick with black, tarry fluid. Flicking off the stickiness, Adelheid thrust her saber into the foe before her. Right that moment, the jet-black magical girls ahead suddenly hopped away like waves parting. The space ahead of her opened up. There was a jet-black magical girl atop a hill, swinging a blade. She was far away. Swing all she wanted, she wouldn’t reach.

No!

Her black sword swung down into empty space. Adelheid clenched her teeth. She didn’t know what. But something was coming.

“Blitzkrieg!”

With a time delay of zero seconds, the slice that should not have reached hit her face. She directed the energy she took to her legs and stepped forward. Cracking open the earth with her step,

she struck at high speed, sweeping her blade out horizontally as she and the enemy passed by each other.

Even with its torso cut halfway through, the samurai-style magical girl tossed away its sword to wrap its arms around Adelheid. By the time Adelheid was wondering what was going on, she felt a sharp impact in her torso and groaned deep in her throat. A black rod had pierced her cape to impale her. Looking to see where it had come from, she saw the black shadow that had to have been right there just now melt hazily into the background and vanish.

"Adelheid!"

"Don'cha worry 'bout me!" Adelheid had thought she'd put energy into her voice, but not only did it crack, it was shaking. She'd been hit hard. It seemed the samurai's embrace hadn't just been a move of desperation but an assist for an ally. Maybe that had even been a kamikaze attack in the first place.

Adelheid cut off the staff stuck in her torso. That made it a bit easier to move. It was thick for an arrow—but hadn't the one that had disappeared been holding a bow?

She knew that one. It was a magical girl that would shoot harpoons instead of arrows. The devotee of the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry—Melville.

"Watch out!" Adelheid cried. "This one enemy can hide like a chameleon!"

Mephis answered her with a yell. Lillian bounded off an enemy and into the air, landing on Mephis's shoulder to jump a level up, reel in the navy-blue yarn strung up on tree branches to swing yet higher, soaring into the air to toss her knitted net in a radial arc. The homunculus caught under the net was sliced to bits or torn to shreds—and then the net caught over an empty spot of nothing before being torn up.

"There!" Mephis kicked at the empty space, knocking back the invisible thing. It rolled, tearing a deep skid in the ground, and a blurry outline became visible. Its magic wasn't as effective as the real Melville. The vague shadow was right in front of where Lillian landed. It was a fox before the hounds.

Lillian tugged the knitting yarn over her shoulder, and the yarn she had strung up around the ground tightened. With its feet caught, the shadow—the black Melville—was finally out of options, showing herself to draw her bow at Lillian, when a crow swooped

toward it and tore its throat to shreds.

"Sally!"

Help's arrived, Adelheid thought, looking over to see Sally was also looking on her last legs. She was carrying the detransformed Lightning on her back. It seemed she'd passed out.

"Hey, you!" Mephis yelled as she punched an enemy. "The hell've you guys been doing?! You better explain what's going on!"

"I don't know, either, okay?!" Sally's crow shone intensely bright, and the homunculi slowed down.

Mephis punched, Adelheid sliced, and Lillian tied and beat.

Sally wiped her forehead with her upper arm and sighed. "Yeahhh, I really have no idea… Pshuke got knocked away from us and went off somewhere. Ranyi and Diko got separated from us, and Lightning wouldn't listen to me when I tried to tell her to stop, ignoring fuel consumption to fight at full power, and then she passed out… What about on your end?"

"Kumi-Kumi and Kana took a real nasty fucker with them and ran," said Mephis. "Better than you guys, so we win."

"It's totally pointless to compete over who's better off," Adelheid pointed out.

Adelheid flicked a glance at Lightning, on Sally's back—she looked like she was in pain but remained picturesque, smiling in her sleep. That wasn't acting. She really was passed out. So what the heck had that been the other day, when she'd taken Adelheid's attack like it was nothing and then left? And the worst part was that this was just the time you'd want her to show off that abnormal toughness, and she wasn't being useful when she should be.

Still, the three of them now being four and a bird made the fight a bit easier. Adelheid constricted the blood vessels in her torso to stanch the bleeding and fought with all the strength she could. She didn't scrimp with the use of her magic, cape sweeping and saber swiping, and before you knew it, the number of enemies had decreased.

But this wasn't a relief—it made her uneasy. This wasn't the first time the black magical girls had momentarily retreated. Right before they threw in those grenades or the time that one with a sword had raised her blade—in other words, when doing an attack that was bound to hit their allies—they'd back up without any sort of discussion required.

"Watch out!" Adelheid cried.

A sudden burnt smell tickled her nose. They all leaped away, and at the same moment, there was an explosion.

Black flames wavered playfully, the fire spreading from one thing to the next. Adelheid covered her mouth. Smoke hung in the air. The black fire spread. Melted in the flames, a jet-black magical girl grinned. Adelheid knew that silhouette. It was the Archfiend Cram School graduate, Lake of Fire Flame Flamey.

Black flames roared up explosively. The flames kept on spreading and spreading. Someone screamed. Adelheid thought—there was no way they could find Flame Flamey when she was merged with fire, and Adelheid couldn't deal physical damage to her. In other words, this was someone Adelheid couldn't beat.

In coordination with Flamey, the black magical girls all swooped in at once. Adelheid's group blocked, hindered, and tried to avoid them, but the black flames obstructed their path. Sally got punched, and she and Lightning were sent flying together. Adelheid leaped after them to catch Lightning's body. Lightning was still looking serene.

Ah could just about throw 'er away, Adelheid thought, but of course she couldn't do that. Wrapping Lightning in her cape, she put her on her back. Slicing, sweeping, and blocking enemy attacks to absorb them, she sent the energy right into her slashes.

"What do we do?! Shit!" Mephis yelled.

But forget it, there was nothing they could do. Even if they continued to hold here, the fire was narrowing the space where they could fight around them. Adelheid absorbed attacks, then released, absorbed and released, absorbed and released over and over, when she noticed the presence moving on her back.

"Ahhh, what a nice nap." Lightning tapped the side of Adelheid's head twice. She was in magical-girl form now. "You were leaking a bit of energy, Adelheid."

"The heck? You were stealin' my energy?"

"Stealing it? How rude. It flowed right to me."

Adelheid didn't grasp the logic, but she understood what Lightning had been doing. She'd never known a magical girl before who'd been able to do something like that, but she'd also been forced to understand—whether she liked it or not—Lightning was outside of the norm.

Adelheid blocked an attack, and instead of immediately releasing the energy, she sent it through her body. The energy

gradually seeped out from her back, where she was touching Lightning, and was lost.

"That's theft, gal!"

"Don't say that! You'll make me look bad."

Adelheid turned the energy from attacks toward her internal cycle only. If Lightning was going to steal it, she'd let her take it. If anyone could break them out of this situation, it wasn't Adelheid. It was Lightning.

"Nice, very nice. I've stored up quite a bit," said Lightning.

"Then handle this already!"

Lightning swung up her sword. A glow ran along it, and thunder roared. Purple bolts mowed down the whole area, evaporating the black magical girls. In a trancelike voice, Lightning murmured, "Lightning Bolt."

"Sayin' a move name *after* ya fire it is against the style."

"Oh, please. It's fine."

"And yer taste in namin' ain't the best."

"I don't want to hear that from you." Lightning giggled, and Adelheid laughed quietly as well.

Holding on to the leg of her crow, Sally flew over to come down beside Adelheid. She seemed glad for some reason. "You two were looking a little Cutie Healer–esque, yeahhh."

"What in the Sam Hill?"

"Is that a compliment?"

"Of course it is," Sally replied.

Lightning fired off some more bolts, thinning the enemy forces, and Mephis and Lillian beat those that fled and stamped them out, while Adelheid ran over the black flames toward them.

Adelheid heard another scream. Her eyebrows came together. The scream was far away. No, it was far but getting closer. A giant abacus roared in while knocking down trees, Pshuke and Calkoro riding it.

The two magical girls were shrieking, clinging to the abacus as they landed in the middle of the flames. Sparks danced up high, caressing them as they both screamed two, three times as loud as when they'd landed, saying, "Hot! Hot!"

"Hottttt!"

Pshuke sprayed misted white fluid all over, and the flames' might subsided in the blink of an eye. With the strongest spray, she blew out the ball of flame, and the black Flamey writhed in agony

and disappeared.

◇ Ranyi

A swarm of jet-black magical girls that just about filled her whole field of view, overwhelming the group. Ranyi kicked and punched, but no matter how many she defeated, they kept on welling out forever, like a faucet that someone had forgotten to twist off. Pshuke had run away, Lightning had collapsed, and Sally had taken hold of her crow and fled with enemies in pursuit and Lightning in her arms.

Ranyi was staggering. Everything hurt. If possible, she wanted to never move again. Diko was the only one still moving. Up against a homunculus designed after the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, Diko was still fighting. Though she was being pushed back, she had not fallen. The homunculus's power and speed were inferior to the real Cranberry, who Ranyi had seen countless time in images. But that was compared with the real thing. Looking at these homunculi as individual units, she was frighteningly strong. Right before Cranberry's hand reached out to stroke her, Diko vanished, and Cranberry's hand brushed a tree. Under her touch, the tree burst open from the inside.

Shaking her head, Ranyi kicked at a jet-black magical girl. It felt like the inside of her skull had been shaken up.

Diko had been training on homunculi more diligently than anyone before even entering this school. That had to be why she could still fight. Ranyi wasn't as diligent as Diko—since she'd thought that wasn't a very important factor to be chosen as Lazuline.

Now that she thought about it, Diko had been more diligent than anyone about everything. But put the other way, that meant even training her hardest, she'd failed to be chosen as Lazuline.

She had wanted to become Lazuline. She'd put up with everything for that one goal, but in the end, it had been no use. But even after it had been decided that Diko couldn't become Lazuline, she'd continued the same training. Neither was she thinking like Ranyi about the next after the third. She just did it like it was the obvious thing to do.

Ranyi breathed out, then in. She was close to her limits. She

looked at Diko. Their eyes met. Diko smiled. That wasn't a smile of resignation or desperation. She had looked clearly at Ranyi and smiled.

Ranyi breathed in again. She asked Diko, *"What's so funny?"* Without speaking out loud, Diko answered, *"That look on your face like you're ready to cry was funny."*

Ranyi breathed out, smacking her cheeks hard. The inside of her cheek split, and the taste of blood spread in her mouth. It was the perfect stimulant.

The scenery transformed around them. She was no longer looking at the mountains at night. There was nothing around, just endless blue sky and earth all the way to the horizon. This was the place Lazuline belonged. Diko and Cranberry were fighting there, while all around, homunculi were dancing in ecstasy.

You think I look funny when I'm about to cry? Ranyi yelled back threateningly via her mind.

Diko smiled again.

Oh, so you can show me a good expression, huh? Ranyi laughed. *That look is way more you.*

Then Ranyi gave a short howl. A magical girl with a Gatling gun swung around its barrel to point at her. Before she could fire, Ranyi closed the distance between them, taking the gun under her left arm. She broke it off like snapping a joint in a lock, throwing the enemy off balance to strike it in the knee, then a kick high up to smash its temple.

"Don't ya underestimate me!"

Smacking her tail on the ground, she leaped. Midair, she flipped upside down, launched off a tree branch, then flipped again to right herself, kicking away Cranberry's rose. Black flower petals dancing, the homunculus turned back to glare at her.

Ranyi shot a silent sign to Diko, who responded with a smile.

She erased all the madly dancing homunculi from her mind, all aside from Cranberry. Those were to be ignored. Cranberry wasn't using her wide-area destructive sound waves because she was taking care not to hit the others. There was no point in bothering fighting what was just an obstruction to the enemy.

Matching Diko's blow, Ranyi thrust out with a spear-hand. Dropping it right before it could be blocked, she switched to a backhand blow, and this time, Diko matched her with a front kick, the two of them moving like a single creature. There was no need to say a word. Lazuline should move on instinct.

Cranberry's brutal high kick came flying at Ranyi, knocking her back even through her overhead block, sending her rolling along the ground. Cranberry didn't give her a glance, turning back in the other direction to press close after Diko, who was trying to back up with zigzagging steps.

Ranyi smiled. The tougher things were, the more Lazuline would smile.

With kicks, punches, claws, swords, and needles, it was as if the black magical girls were carving up her body, but they didn't exist, so there was no need to pay attention to them. Smacking with her tail, she peeled herself off the ground to leap to a tree that had broken right in the middle to fall on the ground.

Ranyi activated her magic. She went through a triangle entrance made up of broken branches. She connected one door to the other. She came out the exit made of two fallen trees leaning on each other. Ahead of her was Diko's back. There was no need to call out to her. She charged forward toward Diko's back, and the instant before they would have touched, Diko vanished from the world. In front of Ranyi's eyes was the Musician of the Forest. Ranyi jumped.

Her hand touched Cranberry's face. Grabbing those long ears tightly, she pulled them close. Cranberry's fingers stroked Ranyi's stomach. Something inside her burst. Hot liquid overflowed. Blood burbling from her lips, Ranyi murmured voicelessly. The words *"Don't underestimate the tenacity of a goldfish"* reached no ears. Ranyi head-butted Cranberry, kicking her in the back of the head as she spun the two of them around, and when Diko appeared, she hit Cranberry's gut with a short upper.

Cranberry still did not fall. Of course. Being the mortal enemy

of the first Lapis Lazuline, the Musician of the Forest wouldn't go down that easily.

Ranyi and Diko pincered Cranberry from the front and the rear, hitting her continuously with short strikes. All the vital points at the back were at Ranyi's disposal—kidneys, spine, vertebrae of the neck. Diko dropped her elbow on Cranberry's collarbone, vanishing before the enemy could strike back. Ranyi didn't retreat, kicking low at Cranberry's calves, then slipped and fell.

Huh? she thought, but her body wouldn't move. She felt oddly heavy. Her vision was red. Diko's expression was grave. The jet-black magical girls were coming to swarm where Ranyi had fallen. She had to move. But she couldn't. She couldn't even manage to lift a finger. Cranberry kicked Diko, knocking her out of Ranyi's field of view, then lumbered heavily in the direction Diko had flown as if she couldn't even see Ranyi. *Your opponent's right here*, Ranyi said in her mind.

The Musician of the Forest turned back. It wasn't that she'd heard Ranyi's thoughts. As proof of that, Cranberry wasn't paying attention to her. There was someone else captured in the Musician's gaze. A magical girl in a white school uniform pierced through the darkness to appear, leaping. The Musician's body warped and bent but still tried to keep moving forward, and the white magical girl swung a weapon like a *naginata* at her, and the Musician's head flew from her torso.

The one holding the *naginata*—the white magical girl—sighed like she was wringing everything from the depths of her lungs, then immediately came to peer into Ranyi's face, turning back to yell something.

Next, a girl with a rifle on her back showed up to yell, "Uluru is the administrator! Everyone, stop fighting!"

The jet-black magical girls stopped moving. Ranyi exhaled, and blood spewed out along with it.

If the administrator was here, then it was okay now. With that thought, she lost consciousness.

◇ Rappy Taype

The magical girl–type homunculi were gradually increasing in number. Not only that, Tetty had gone over to the enemy side, too.

The way she moved and the change in her expression told them. It wasn't that she'd betrayed them; she was just being mind-controlled. They couldn't harm her.

They couldn't use their magical phones to get help, either. They couldn't get through to anyone.

Everyone was being pushed to the limit. Miss Ril was fighting the fencer magical girl on her own. Rappy was dashing around the black swarm to stir them up, but the enemies were too good, and they wouldn't let her get away with it, leaving her with more than a few wounds. The open slice on her back was particularly deep.

Dory drove through an enemy with her drill, calling out to Arlie in her shrill voice. Arlie responded at an even higher pitch. Even without understanding their cries, their panic and frustration came across.

As they were talking, Arlie's armor was being grabbed at and torn away. Tetty was grabbing and crushing her armor faster than it could regenerate. Tetty Goodgripp was strong. And when she was being controlled, her usual gentleness was gone. She assaulted Arlie without mercy.

If they let her go on like this, Arlie wouldn't last. Rappy yelled, "Arlie! Swap!"

Rappy smoothly slipped in to stand in front of Arlie. Tetty tried to grab Rappy's arm but only managed to peel off one layer of the wrap stuck to it. Right as she peeled off the second layer of wrap, Rappy's hand grabbed her mitten from above, holding it down. Rappy wrenched them both around as she circled to Tetty's back, wrapping her left leg around her to restrain Tetty's right arm as Rappy's own right arm went around her neck. Rappy clenched it hard, strangling her. A crushed voice leaked from Tetty's throat.

Arlie yelled something, and when the homunculi tried to swarm Rappy, Arlie beat them away. An agonized sound seeped from Tetty's lips. Rappy's arm squeezed harder. She wasn't going to kill their own group leader. She was going to strangle her unconscious. But right when she'd just about done it, a shock ran through her side. Her arms' grip weakened. Tetty slipped away, dropping to the ground to cough like she was in pain. Rappy pulled out the dagger thrust in her side and tossed it away, sticking wrap over her wound to stanch the bleeding.

It was the fencer. She'd saved Tetty by throwing the dagger at her from a distance. Rappy looked over to see Miss Ril was

crumbling and starting to fall apart. Even for someone as sturdy as Miss Ril, the fencer was extraordinarily powerful. She was too much to face one-on-one.

When a homunculus attacked from behind, Rappy struck back with an elbow, then followed up with a kick to knock it away. *I'm doing this all of my own will*, she thought. It seemed she wasn't being controlled by the fencer.

Arlie was under attack by multiple enemies. Struck by whips, gouged by spikes, sliced by blades, her armor was being destroyed. Black mucus like the body of a homunculus oozed out from between her destroyed parts to repair her armor, but the pace at which she was being destroyed was faster.

Miss Ril was being driven back, too. The fencer sliced at her, scattering fragments of her body. With each strike of the fencer's knee or elbow, the cracks in her body spread, hideously deforming her shape. One more blow to the face, and instantly, her figure warped, her head swallowing up the fencer's arm. Miss Ril's body, deforming like fluid, twined around the fencer. It was one of the metals Rappy had brought: mercury.

Nice! Mercury!

Before the fencer could shake Miss Ril off, Dory bashed into her. When another homunculus tried to get in her way, Rappy body-slammed it away, opening up Dory's path.

Dory tried to drive her drill into the fencer's stomach, and the fencer stopped the drill's spin with both hands. Drill Dory's magic drill would continue to spin until its destruction was complete. The more an enemy tried to stop it, the faster its rate of spin got and the harder and stronger the drill became, and there was no upper limit.

Fencer and drill maintained a momentary balance, but ultimately it ended in the drill's victory. Its powerful rotation burst through the fencer's torso, flinging it away to hit the ground. Miss Ril tried to pull away from the fencer, but a hand grasped her tight. It was the fencer.

Before Rappy even noticed something flash, Miss Ril's whole body was sliced apart. The scattered mercury of her body tried to gather together, but the fencer's palm struck it from above, making it scatter once more. The fencer's mouth creaked open into a grin. It used its hands to crawl along, moving so fast you wouldn't think it was just a torso, to body-slam Dory, slicing at her when she staggered. Blood spurted.

Supporting Dory as she was about to collapse, Arlie spun the two of them around to take the blow from the fencer instead. Her armor, which had gradually been regenerating, blocked the fencer's attack with its thickly viscous surface, and the fencer skittered backward like a cockroach.

Tetty got up. Terror and turmoil could be seen in her eyes. The brainwashing had been undone, but she was moving slowly, and it was the most she could do to avoid the homunculi's attacks. Rappy ran, withstanding pain as she went, to scoop up Miss Ril's body with wrap, ducking to avoid an enemy attack, then leaping to slide in and stand beside Arlie. Even just breathing was painful. Though she'd stanched the bleeding, the damage was serious. And she wasn't the only one. They'd all easily gone over their limits.

It was baffling how Dory hadn't collapsed with such awful injuries. Tetty was intensely disturbed. Miss Ril's body wouldn't come together. Arlie clenched a fist and looked ahead. Rappy looked over that way, too. In the distance, they heard a loud noise.

The sound was gradually approaching. After a while, the black swarms parted all at once. A blue magical girl leaped out, stabbing a homunculus with her trident. The stabbed unit instantly froze white, then shattered to pieces.

"Arlie! Sorry I'm late!"

Rappy's thoughts were all over the place. Arlie knew this person? Why was she here? But this wasn't the time for questions. The newcomer with the trident fired ice arrows that impaled the black magical girls. The fencer grabbed the homunculus beside it to block the arrows, continuing to use it as a shield to charge forward with fearsome speed, then leaping past Arlie to slice at the girl in blue. She blocked with her trident, and Arlie swung a fist at the fencer. The fencer leaped back, skittering away to disappear into the back of the swarm.

The black magical girls surrounded them from a distance. It seemed they were wary of projectile weapons.

"Hey! Stranger! What's going on, here?!" Rappy demanded.

"I'm sorry! I don't really know, either!" the girl with the trident replied, swinging her weapon up high. "We're doing it! Get ready!"

"Doing furreal?" Dory yelled—what did she mean they were doing? Arlie responded as well, but Rappy couldn't tell what she was saying.

Dory swung her drill while Arlie swung her right fist. Arlie

drew Rappy and Tetty close with her left arm. Rappy didn't really get what was going on, but she did get that it seemed best to stay close, for now.

The three magical girls swung down their weapons and fist all at once, and the girl with the trident yelled, "Ultimate Princess Explosion!"

The air made a creaking sound, and Rappy's vision went white.

EPILOGUE

◇ **Kana**

Once she was sucked in, Kana realized this was Bella Lace's magic, the one who gathered and materialized corpses' regrets. She'd just learned about that the day before in class.

Unfortunately, she hadn't learned how to deal with this magic. No one must have anticipated that they would fight it.

She couldn't see, she couldn't move, and she was gradually getting colder. She couldn't breathe, either. Her consciousness was fading. It felt like the polar opposite of the time she'd been freed from that magic seal in prison. Even the feeling of her body heat being drained was leaving her. She was drifting in the darkness.

After a long time passed, she thought someone was speaking to her.

That someone said, *"I can't let you die here."* She felt like she'd heard that voice before, but maybe she hadn't. It told her, *"Making friends is very nice, but it's not funny if you die guarding one."* Rather harsh, for a vision on the shores of death.

Someone's hand grabbed her neck. Its grip was rough.

She was being carried somewhere. She didn't know where. Kana opened her eyes. Something bright filtered through the tree leaves, speckling her face. It was sunlight. The day was dawning.

She sat up, then clasped her right hand. It had moved. Her arms and legs, too. She turned her neck and looked around. She was in the forest. No homunculi in sight. Looking up at the sky, she saw it was starting to turn white in the east.

"It seems…I survived."

There was nobody to answer. Kana stood up, put a hand to her waist, and stretched wide.

"It's her! Over there! She's alive!"

She definitely knew that voice. Turning toward it, she saw a

familiar face. It was Mephis. Kana didn't know what was so funny, but she was smiling. Tears were streaking down Kumi-Kumi's face as she wept beside her. Was something sad happening or something glad happening? Their expressions were contradictory. Kana didn't understand what was going on.

Mephis yelled into her magical phone. "She's alive! She's been alive, for real! She's a hundred percent alive! Manhunt over! Everyone get back to the school! …What? It's not a manhunt? It's a search party? They're basically the same thing!"

Crying, Kumi-Kumi ran over to Kana and clung to her waist, tackling her down to the ground. She was sobbing hysterically, not even forming real words.

Kana still didn't understand what had happened, but it seemed like things were good for now. Kana patted Kumi-Kumi's back and got up, only to be body-slammed by Mephis and knocked down again.

◇ Calkoro

Standing in front of the principal's office, she took a deep breath. She was somewhat prepared. *It's okay*, she told herself. She'd made it through countless life-and-death situations out on the mountain. In fact, you could call it a miracle she was still alive. In that sense, the principal's office shouldn't be much different from out there.

Once she had steeled herself, she knocked. There were zero students dead. It was fair to call that incredible, after that kind of disaster. She should be commended for such a feat.

With a "Come in" from the other side of the door, Calkoro shakily entered the room. Halna's voice was pitched higher than usual. She sounded like she was in a good mood. If her voice had been trembling in rage, that would have been understandable. Calkoro couldn't think of any reason why Halna should be in a good mood.

Restraining the trembling of her right hand with her left, she clasped the doorknob and opened the door. "Pardon me." Stepping into the room, Calkoro closed the door, and her whole body shook again.

Halna had a little smile on her face.

It was frightening. Calkoro's knees felt like they would buckle,

but she somehow forced her legs forward, coming to stand in front of Halna. Would Halna make her take responsibility for the whole thing and have her die in an accident, or would she be sent to the lab and cut into pieces?

"I heard you went to the mountain to try to bring the situation under control," said Halna. "You've done well."

"Y-yes, ma'am."

Unexpectedly, that was praise. So then did the slap-down come after this? Was there a "but" coming? Or would it be *"Did you think I would say something like that?"*

Halna was still smiling. Calkoro had never seen that expression on her face before.

"The lab technician who set up the security system had unintentionally created an error in the settings, which caused the whole predicament," Halna explained. "In other words, this was human error. The homunculus-generation device malfunctioned, going over the limiter, and it wound up creating many powerful homunculi. It was a convergence of a lot of bad luck that also slipped past the management net."

Normally, Halna would be spewing all manner of verbal abuse toward the lab right now. But her expression did not change, the tips of her ears bobbing in a sprightly rhythm. "The Inspection Department sensed something was wrong and headed to the scene immediately. I'm told that with the authority of the administrator, they eliminated the homunculi that had gone out of control and managed to safely resolve the situation."

Calkoro had heard there had been a mysterious big explosion, but Halna didn't mention that.

"The one in charge of managing the security system was forced to take responsibility and resign from their job, and it seems they've decided that's settled it. That's how the lab deals with things. Well, the lack of deaths was a big part of it. Normally, it wouldn't have been strange for the magical-girl class to be abolished."

There had been zero reported deaths. So then just what had been that dead mage Calkoro had seen? The sigil on the back of his hand had indicated he was an employee of the lab. Halna was still in a good mood. There was no way she wouldn't know that Calkoro knew, but she wasn't bringing up that mysterious body at all.

An accident caused by a convergence of bad luck and human error, Halna had said. But something wasn't right. Something—

actually, everything wasn't right.

What had those magical girl–shaped homunculi been? Calkoro hadn't been told that they'd gotten new models.

And on top of that, the homunculus based on Grim Heart had appeared in a position that seemed to be defending the observation deck and the master communications unit, never moving from that spot. It was just as if it had been protecting the biggest weak point —the master unit—which would have deactivated the homunculi if attacked. A homunculus would never protect a stronghold without being ordered to do so. The intent there was clear.

Holding her left arm with her right hand, Calkoro somehow kept her entire body from trembling. *What's the point of thinking about things you shouldn't be considering?* she scolded herself. Just how many people thus far had noticed too much and met unfortunate ends?

"And I also have good news," said Halna.

"Yes?"

"We're welcoming a new transfer student to our magical-girl class. She'll be a wonderful addition—not just a nice bit of propaganda but also an example to the students."

The moment the subject turned to the exchange student, Halna's voice went even higher. "I have to return to headquarters now. Make sure to welcome her kindly."

Halna made a clearly identifiable smile, and Calkoro, trembling, smiled back.

◇ Tetty Goodgripp

Just what sort of accident had to happen for things to wind up like that?

Fortunately, no one had died, but people had been hurt. Adelheid had been seriously injured, stabbed in the torso, and Ranyi was still in the hospital—Tetty had heard that she'd been really touch and go for a while there. And even though it hadn't been bad enough to be hospitalized, Rappy had been stabbed, and Dory had been cut. Arlie's armor had been ripped off, and the one who did that had been no one else but Tetty. The memories of the time she'd been mind-controlled remained with her vividly.

Just remembering made her stomach start turning. She had so

much sincere respect for her classmates, who'd kept fighting through that abnormal situation.

But even so, it was really good that nobody had died. She doubted that made everything good, but nobody would get mad at her for only thinking that. *Thank goodness*, Tetty repeatedly thought, relieved that she was capable of being glad about her classmates' safety.

After five days off school following the incident, class was back in session. Getting some time off did calm her heart a bit. Tetty had heard that magical girls had strong hearts, but still, five days was short. She slapped her cheeks twice the usual amount and somehow got herself to school.

Satou comforted her when she arrived in the garden, and she burst into tears upon seeing the mage. Once she was back in the classroom, she saw her group members and cried some more, and it wasn't just her—but Miss Ril and Rappy were crying, too. They all hugged, celebrating their safety.

"She's here! Teacher's here!" someone announced, and the students buzzed as they hurried to their seats. Things were "back to normal" after five days, although this wasn't exactly the "normal" they all knew. Ranyi still wasn't there; Kana seemed like she'd gotten a bit closer with her group; she was chatting with Mephis. Tetty was curious as to what they were talking about, but she couldn't overhear them.

Calkoro came into the classroom. Following Tetty's call to rise, the girls stood and bowed. When they lifted their heads again, they saw Calkoro looking rather morose. And there was someone standing behind her. It wasn't anyone Tetty knew.

Arlie said something that sounded like a chirp. Tetty didn't understand what it meant, but she sounded unusually cheerful.

"Um…this is the transfer student, Snow White."

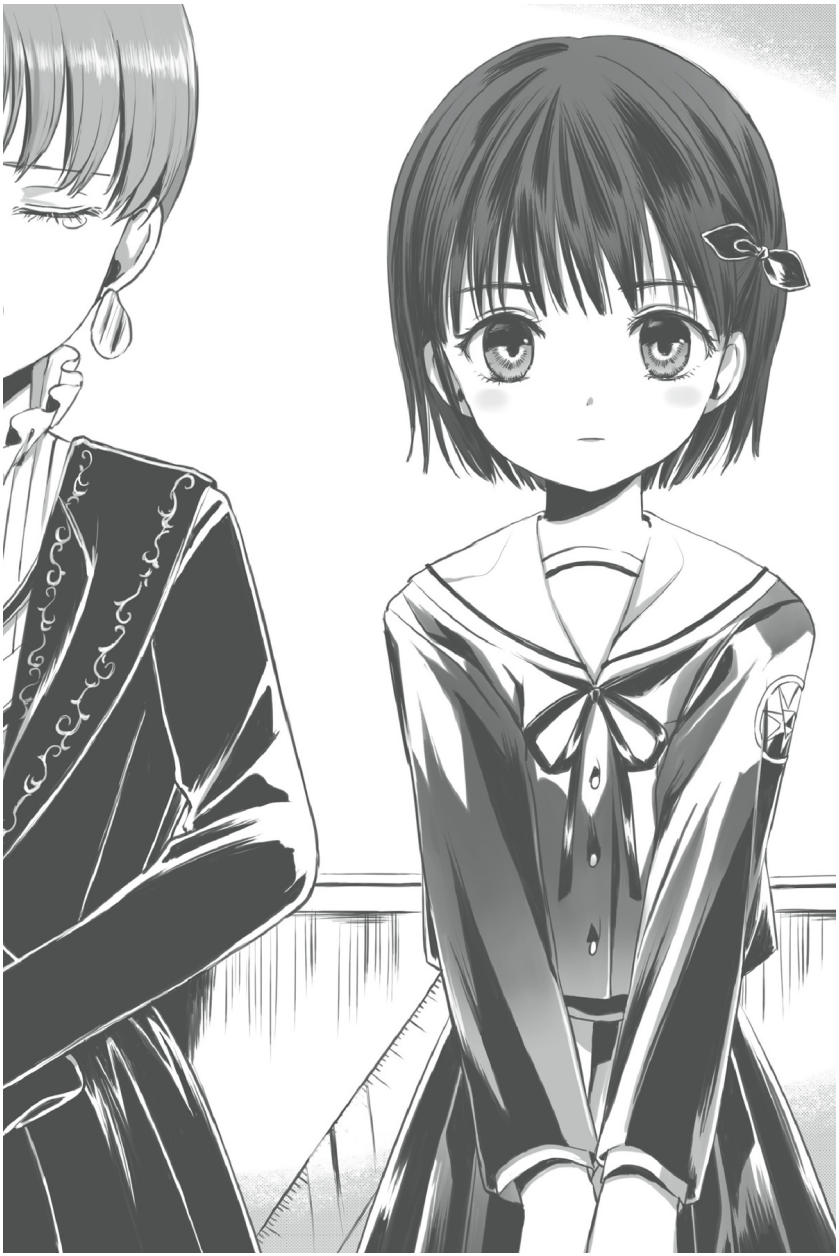
After Calkoro said the girl's name, the students started whispering among themselves. Tetty felt like she'd heard that name somewhere. And if she knew the name, it was fair to say this person was pretty famous.

Where have I heard that name, again…? Hmmm… Someone definitely mentioned it to me before…

"I'm Snow White. It's a pleasure to meet everyone."

The petite girl bowed her head and immediately raised it again. Her voice, attitude, posture, and even her features seemed oddly

mature.



Afterword

It truly has been a long time since the previous installment in the main story. This is the magical girl who's been too busy writing the main story to actually appear in the main story, otherwise known as Asari Endou.

While I managed to avoid going past the deadline for the newest anthology—the one with many rare bonus short stories, *Magical Girl Raising Project: Episodes* Δ (wh-what a good deal!)—it still took too much time, and getting it published was painful (ah, right, the print book and ebook will be released simultaneously).

To all the fans who have been left waiting, my apologies.

In *Black*, the usual thing does not happen—the thing that comes up in every book for a few people or more than a dozen.

Not only did *that* not happen, but also, everyone worked together to defeat enemies, too. There is no maid who pretends to be helping while she's secretly manipulating hearts and no elf hunter sneaking in to fire javelins. They are actually joining forces to fight enemies.

Perhaps some may lament that the author has taken a turn for the worse or that writing nothing but heartwarming short stories has corrupted my work. But don't worry! In the next one, *White*, a new transfer student will join them… Oh, I can't say any more. Spoilers are not allowed in an afterword.

Granted, I have done a little bit of spoiling here, but I get the feeling that the sequel will be titled *White*. Earlier, S-mura was saying how it'd be funny if it wound up something other than *White*, so there's still the slight possibility the next book in the main story will be called something different. But it basically seems like it will probably be *White*, I'm sure. Please wait for it, while also mentally preparing yourself even if the subtitle becomes *Veridian Green*.

On another topic.

Setting this book in a magical-girl class means that the whole cast is middle school students. When I put out ten or more new characters at once, I always give them a variety of ages, professions, and whatnot in order to make them easier for readers to identify, but I couldn't do that this time.

Some of the magical girls are very unlike middle schoolers, and some are not actually middle schoolers at all, but still, I couldn't let them all not be middle schoolers, and I struggled quite a lot with that.

Also, though you may be surprised by this, the truth is that I am not a middle schooler. So it's difficult to write about what they do or what sort of things they talk about based on my own experience, and I looked to my niece for help.

Thanks to my niece, I was able to learn about the real life of middle schoolers. She was so helpful!

Maybe some people who are currently in middle school, when reading the depiction of middle schoolers in the book, thought, *Hold on, middle schoolers aren't like this*. But that's because my niece is a magical girl, so some of her life as a middle school magical girl wound up in there, too. Even if you think it's not right for a middle schooler, please be generous and forgive me, like, *If she's a middle school magical girl, then sure, whatever*.

But saying all this, I still feel like a middle schooler.

To everyone in the editorial department who has guided me, and to S-mura, whose time has been chipped away while working like a storm to resolve countless problems for me and mercilessly dispose of my writings: Thank you very much.

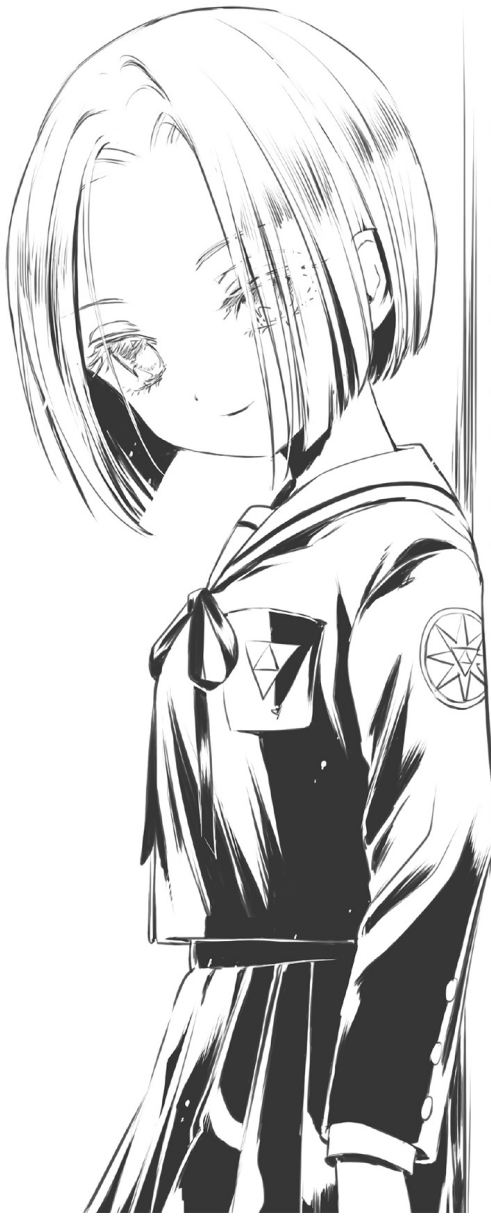
Marui-no, thank you very much for your wonderful illustrations. Revisions and changes have resulted in more versions with different costumes and accessories, rather like updates in video games. They are all in my treasure box. Though it's wound up like the wrongdoer here is benefiting in the end, that sort of thing does happen in *Magical Girl Raising Project*, huh…? Oh, I really am sorry.

To Chihiro Yuki, who made those wonderful comments on the blurb, and to Hanasaki Morinaka, thank you very much. As Asari☆ Endou, Virtual Light Novel Bestseller, I tremble with the honor of receiving such praise from industry veterans.

And to all my readers, I'm sorry I've made you wait. Thank you

very much for being patient. I'll publish the sequel as quickly as possible. As for the next part of *Breakdown* and whatnot—yes, I'll get through that as quickly as possible…to the best of my ability!

See you again next time, in *Veridian*…er, in *White*!



Hello, this is Marui-no.

I had a lot of fun getting to feel like I was drawing illustrations for a typical (?) girls' school story.

Pretransformation is nice...

Let's meet again in the next volume!

Thank you very much!

Marui-no

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